

The Support
Worker of
Emile Durkheim
House

(c) Jon Thomas Rowland

Copyright © 2012 Jon Thomas Rowland

All rights reserved.

ISBN-10:1470051869
ISBN-13:978-1470061860

This work depicts no real people, but many real routines and procedures at a typical Canadian group home for people with mental illness (mainly schizophrenia). I trust that some readers will be interested to know what these are, and what happens in these benighted satellites of our mental health-care system – Hell Houses....

I wanted our own entries and reports to be preserved. I liked to think of someone like me reading what I wrote. Like me, but not me. Adam said it wouldn't happen. It was the ministry's new policy. After seven years they'd all be burnt. Now that Adam himself has been cremated, I find it unacceptable. I think it's typically cruel of the authorities to tell us in advance that nothing is to be saved. They do it in the name of confidentiality. In reality they're sicker than any of their clients. The issue is secrecy. They want us to feel good about them for what they do. By consigning their secrets to the flames along with those we confide in. Their secrets don't even matter, except they get in the way of our feeling good about them, and their feeling good about themselves. That won't happen. Why wait seven years? Burn us now.

"He wasn't killed...."

(He was murdered.)

- Frederick (Not Fred)

P. 16

THE SUPPORT WORKER

I remember when the manager called. I was out looking for Pierre. He had run away from us again. Each time he ran away made it that much sooner he'd be back in the mental ward, and he was already past due. He wanted so badly to be with his family.

The manager began as she always did, by offering me a shift. It was Adam's, on Monday. Actually, there was one significant difference, which indicated that she was thinking ahead. She asked me where I was. I suppose she didn't want me to break down on the street when she told me. Adam died this weekend.

*

Frederick (not Fred) knew how to cope. It was Jonathan Swift's perception that true happiness consisted of being perpetually self-deceived. I think the operative word was

Jon Thomas Rowland

“self.” I suppose the principal difference between the way we deceived ourselves and the way others did, was our delusions usually made us happy; whereas, other peoples' deceptions almost always made us miserable.

This reminds me of one of Adam's remarks last month. He had just got back from shopping. I think I must have been doing the manager's shift. I was helping Adam carry bins of groceries from the trunk of his Volvo into the pantry. Betty was helping too, for two dollars. Something was making her laugh, or rather she was making herself laugh at something that had been said to her. It was a forced braying laugh, with her big mouth open and her head tilted way back. I mocked her by laughing the same way, and Adam joined in. Betty kept laughing, not getting it.

I explained that we were mocking her because she sounded phony. Adam turned to me and said with surprising bitterness, "There are a lot of phony people in the world, Norm." That would explain why we're so miserable.

*

The manager said Frederick (not Fred) would incorporate Adam into his delusions. He said the Pakis had him down in Pakistan. They were making a new Adam. Later he saw him in the cars driving by on Thing Street. He had joined the others who peopled his delusions, like JFK Jr., Martin Luther

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House
King and Marvin Gaye. He was with the blacks.

When I told Caspar what he'd said, he nodded confidently. Caspar was always the boy genius, although he was thirty years old and until recently still lived at home. Frederick had worked so much with Adam in the kitchen. Now he was fucked.

But he was *self*-deceived. He was delusional and he was happy.

*

The first time I remember seeing Adam he was standing beside his car in front of Emile Durkheim House next door. It must have been payday. He was holding a red carton of cigarettes. I'd get used to his Lucky Strikes. It might have been another time, but I think it was only a few moments later, when he climbed up the front steps and paused on the porch before entering. By then he had one of the cigarettes between his thin lips. He was wearing shorts. His legs were thin. The rest of his clothing consisted of an open shirt with the sleeves rolled up, a T-shirt, and running shoes. It would become as familiar as the cigarettes. He was at least 6'3", with large hands and feet like a stick-man's. He had a sensitive face, a finely shaped head. His light brown hair needed trimming.

Jon Thomas Rowland

He seemed at once young and old, athletic and frail. There was something troubling about his arms and legs. There was a suggestion of gauntness and pain. "That wouldn't be because of this enormous brace I'm wearing on my left leg, now would it?" Adam asked me once, when I said he looked uncomfortable. I tried to sympathize, but he wouldn't accept pity. He'd been through a bad accident. I couldn't see that day more than two years ago, partly because it was still early summer. In hot weather when he wore sandals, I saw that he'd also lost his left big toe.

Among others pieces of useless information, I told him that I bought my shoes second hand. One day when we were working in the kitchen I mentioned that I got athlete's foot after I started to jog. He thanked me for that information too. It wasn't on my curriculum vitae. He said the second-hand shoes probably had more to do with it. He took care of his feet. He just didn't have that much of them left.

The inside of his gaunt left arm was scarred where the bone had burst through the skin from elbow to wrist as he clenched the steering wheel that nearly crushed him to death. He was a man of many hurts. He suffered from chronic pain.

*

Just a few days ago I'd sat in on a meeting with Adam, the

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

manager, and Pierre's team. The team was comprised of half a dozen men and women employed by the asylum to help Pierre adjust to life in the community. That was how they described being a tenant. We were a community. Most tenants understandably preferred to remain in their rooms. Certainly Pierre did, or he would run to the opposite extreme. Literally. He would run away. Caspar was afraid he'd get run over on his shift, and he'd have to write the incident report.

Despite its promising name (it was called an "Impact Team") Pierre's team was to impact what we were to community. That is, nothing at all. The six members took turns marching up the dark-varnished stairs two or three times a day, only to stop and tap politely on Pierre's door before turning away, like they thought they were chamber maids at a spa. Pierre invariably refused to answer, but walking in was unthinkable. Yet so far as they knew he might already have died of starvation and be starting to rot.

Fortunately a relative had deposited a lot of snacks the last time he visited him, only a few days ago. Pierre wasn't starving though he wasn't well nourished either. I knew because, being more concerned about responsibility than etiquette, I admitted myself with the master key and took a look. The immediate problem was hygiene. Pierre was afraid to use the washroom down the hall. His bedding was soiled.

Jon Thomas Rowland

I remember seeing the directions for operating the remote that Adam had written on a "post-it" note and taped to the front of the TV for Pierre to use. He'd also put a note in the common log warning Babs not to shut it off at night when she did her endless, nocturnal rounds. It was Pierre's only pleasure. Turning it off was Babs's. Babs read the note, and locked the remote control in the cabinet.

The purpose of the meeting was to decide what if anything could be done to enable Pierre to stay. Otherwise he'd end up back in the asylum or, after they totally gave up on him, in an old age home from which he wouldn't even be able to run away. The manager asked me to attend because, she said, I was their best note-taker. I believe that was an understatement.

*

Caspar was fucked-up. He was an Italian émigré with an anger management problem. He acted younger than he looked, but he looked sixty. He had worked out a lot when he wanted to be a cop but now his six-foot frame was getting fat. He had been a security guard and approached support work the same way. He considered himself an "Alpha Male." His bad temper and physical aggressiveness might have been assets back in Sicily. They would have helped him to quell similarly endowed countrymen. They were a liability with clients.

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

He became a public enemy after he blacked the eye of a motorist for calling him “stoopid fuckin’ wop.” He'd just rammed the man's car, but it was the man's fault, for stopping on the highway. He hadn't cared too much about the accident, although he loved his Mercedes, but being called stupid enraged him. He had paid his way through years of college, attending full-time classes while working as a security guard in Canadian WASP banks. Grabbing the man felt like aiming at him down the barrel of a shotgun. He relished the moment. Slugging him was like squeezing the trigger. Now he had to attend an anger-management class run by a New Age quack who'd taken fewer psychology courses than himself.

*

Mildred never came to the office for her medication. A worker would bring it to her, the pills in a red plastic dosette in one hand, the water in a little paper cup in the other. Some workers preferred to remove the pills from the dosette and put them in a paper cup. They could then carry two cups in one hand, the plastic water pitcher in the other, and do two tenants' "meds" in one trip.

When Serge climbed up the dark-varnished stairs to the second floor, and knocked on Mildred's door, he was usually greeted with threats and abuse. Mildred was a tough broad.

Jon Thomas Rowland

She would say "I got a knife" and "I'm gonna off you."

Serge took this very personally. Maybe it was the intensity of his Slav soul. According to him, when confronted this way he reacted by inviting Mildred to try. Serge eventually get rid of her, for alleged extortion that was probably a cigarette deal gone bad, and certainly at least partly a frame-up. Some tenants would do anything for a cigarette....

*

Serge parked his Lada in front of the House. I remember watching for it when he was late for work. He was usually late. He seemed depressed about his life. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, he had trouble getting up in the morning. He'd started a full-time job as manager at another group home. He was probably tired, and insecure. He lacked self-confidence. He figured he'd fail at his new job, like Russia. He was probably right.

Sometimes Serge parked in front of the funeral home. His girlfriend worked there. It was the same population. Occasionally some do-good organization used the premises at night. That was the same population too. Jack and some of the other tenants regularly crashed Alcoholics Anonymous for the free coffee and donuts. They could have joined, but crashing was more fun.

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

*

Serge was so manic it took hours to slow him down enough to do shift change. By 10 A.M. I'd be speeding too. We'd still be smoking on the steps, two hours after I was supposed to go home (if you could call it that). Luckily I didn't have far to go.

Serge expatiated on Russian Cinema. He wanted to make a movie like Potempkin. Movies were being made right there, under the lens of our security camera, when it worked. They featured ourselves, with a lot of local losers, and guest appearances by the cops. We could have done the Odessa steps, Scarlet on the stairs of Tara, and any other iconic Hollywood staircase scene, on our own dark-varnished stairs....

At least Serge knew something about Russian cinema. In the course of one of our manic mornings he told me that the Great Theme since the Revolution was the "good bad man." He said it was because "the instability destroyed normality as it created a brutal new order crying out for regulation."

In post-revolutionary Russia the strongest regulatory forces were totally discredited. They were really just thugs. At least the army defeated the Fascists.

Serge said his family was communist. A lot of the families in

Jon Thomas Rowland

his village saved the old hammer and sickle and flew it privately on special occasions. His cousins in the army learned old, secret marches. Now there was also the Russian Mafia, the most corrupt but least discredited force for social cohesion in the entire Russian Federation. A sociologist would have attributed that to the strength of its collective fictions. Men of honour, etc. Serge was always writing flaky "agit prop" screen plays about Russian gangsters and other great sinners. Only God loved sinners more.

Serge's girlfriend drove a Volkswagen. It was a classic yellow beetle, expensive. The girlfriend was very Anglo Saxon, tall with long blond hair. She was very severe, for a former Comrade.

*

One night in the smoking lounge I heard Frederick (not Fred) circumstantially describe what had happened to Mildred. He'd given her money for a blowjob, enough for a pack of cigarettes. At least I hope it was a pack. When Mildred got back from the Korean grocery store Frederick (not Fred) thought the least she could do was offer him a smoke. When she refused, he told Serge that Mildred had robbed him at knife-point. Serge was naïve enough to believe him, or maybe he wanted to believe him, and called the police. No one else believed him, but everyone supported him, because by then they all wanted to get rid of

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

Mildred.

This is consistent with what I heard early one morning, around 5 A.M. At first I thought it was just another tenant shouting at the voices, then over Mildred's shrieking I heard Serge's booming admonishment that he'd bar her from every group home in Hogtown, and have her committed to the forensic ward at the Asylum, where she'd get to sample a new medication, the same treatment she'd just dispensed to Frederick (not Fred), but at the manic hands of a posse of crack-whores....

*

Adam was the only worker who ever pitied Mildred. After all, she was mentally ill. Every now and then he'd see her dancing or staggering along the sidewalk, depending on her condition. He told me what a sad case Mildred's was. She'd been a regular house-wife, married, the mother of six kids. Even after the onset of acute mental illness, she'd refused to take any medication, although there was medicine available to her that would have helped. She'd "escalate," as we said, and get evicted from one group home, or "stupid boarding home," as Frederick (not Fred) used to say, to another.

Then there was the time Mildred came down to the office at medication time and gave Caspar the finger....

*

Adam, Gabriel and I were sitting in the office. It was late May, a few weeks after I started. The manager hadn't figured out how to fire the housekeeper yet.

The housekeeper was Hispanic. Despite her total incompetence, she'd cry racism if she were fired outright. Eventually she'd be "let go." In reality she'd be fired, and everyone else would have to do part of her job. Adam would do most of it. He would go shopping at the "No Frills" at least once a week. I went with him a few times, in his little car. His hand bumped my knee when he used the shift. He smoked, and asked me if I wouldn't mind rolling down the window. He said he was sweating like a pig. It was partly because he was physically weak. He never got enough sleep.

I don't think we can overestimate the effect of this on Adam. He should never have been allowed to do as much as he did, but it was imposed on him.

Eventually Adam did virtually all of the cleaning and a great deal of the cooking. We couldn't hire a full-time cook so Adam became the cook, and the shopper too. He was already a support worker (of course), and a cleaner (by default). With bad knees, a brace, and chronic pain, Adam was the one who had to lug around heavy boxes of groceries,

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

once or twice a week.

This made unreasonable physical demands on him. After he started this additional work, he had more trouble sleeping, and more trouble with pain. After returning from a shopping trip it was routine for him to reach for the bottle of painkillers on the mantle. This seriously undermined his morale and aggravated the impact of his personal problems, his financial worries, his sick parents, etc.

In a workplace organized around accommodating people with mental illness, Adam's obvious physical disabilities were barely acknowledged let alone addressed. Thanks to bad management, nearly everyone else was allowed to slack off. The manager did no cleaning, little cooking, and not even very much managing. Babs did virtually nothing at night except make a few bad sandwiches. She opted out of cleaning, in the course of her on-going feud with Gladys. Gladys never cleaned anything either, though she would at least occasionally cook something. The relief staff didn't clean, and were never asked to, although we were overstaffed on weekends, when there was virtually nothing to do, mainly because the residents were more relaxed, without a lot of social workers nickel-diming them, dragging them to appointments, urging them like stupid cheer-leaders to go for walks, or to play soccer.

Adam eventually got half a dozen purple bins that he used instead of boxes. The boxes didn't fit very well in the trunk

Jon Thomas Rowland

of the Volvo and made a lot of extra garbage every week. Laura had to work all the harder, breaking them down and tying them up to go onto the curb. I was often the one to help her out, wrapping the lengths of twine around the large boxes that she had flattened out. The small Kraft dinner boxes always slipped out. They were a nuisance. Laura would press a thumb on the knot and hold it till I finished tying.

I enjoyed the shopping, pushing the cart while Adam foraged ahead for the things he knew by heart. It was like being married. This went on till one of the cleaners, a Jamaican black who lived in another House, made fun of the arrangement. From then on Adam only took tenants shopping with him. The "kitchen program" started up, and they got paid for it.

He naturally bought for the House what he himself liked to eat. I was touched that, working as hard as he was, he probably couldn't afford to buy the same things for himself. This I inferred from the way he'd grab a bite just before going home or right after arriving at work. He was allowed to do so. The company budgeted food for staff, so the haste couldn't be attributed to furtiveness. He was hungry.

He bought chicken strips, "Delicio" brand pizzas, good quality fish (usually haddock), plenty of fries. He made himself what he called "chip butts." They were sandwiches, French fries between two slices of buttered white bread. For

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

a treat he made me a drink flavored with "Ribena" syrup.

Once he bought pineapples and sliced them on the wooden island in the kitchen. I took one and cut into it without first removing the tough skin. He watched me for a moment, then he said "You don't know what you're doing, do you." I bought pineapples in cans. He showed me how to slice fresh ones.

I saved the shopping list that he made for me before he went on his last vacation. Under "Often Used Staples" he listed such items as "bread, milk, salad fixens, fruit, potatoes, juice (breakfast)." He added "2-4 quick meals for weekend staff." Then he must have been distracted, because he wrote a dash but never wrote down the name of the next item beside it.

After the manager's announcement, I lasted through Wednesday but I was failing. The worst part of it was going shopping for the first time since it happened. Shopping was an activity I associated with Adam. Identified is a better word. We were unable to postpone it any longer and still feed the tenants. Nobody even knew how to drive. We had to enlist the services of a caseworker from head office, an outsider. She was very nice, very Anglican, what people call a "good woman." She was fifty, gray-haired, and had a faint mustache. She wore half-glasses around her neck on a chain. She was the worst possible replacement for Adam, who was young and atheistic and would always be. And he was male.

The purple bins were still on the shelf in the pantry. They

Jon Thomas Rowland

hadn't been disturbed since Adam replaced them Friday afternoon.

*

This afternoon, I was saying, we still had time to sit and talk to the tenants. Gabriel was with us. Betty came in for a few minutes, wondering if Adam would let her watch him lift weights. It was one of her favorite things. Adam said he'd do twenty flexes, but started to slow down at the thirteenth flex. He only made it to seventeen. He passed the weights back to Betty, exhausted. Betty smiled. He couldn't fool her. Ladies don't lift weights.

Adam pulled the sleeve of his sports shirt up over his lean bicep. "Feel," he commanded. "Muscle." Betty touched it gently, blushing. "Wow," she said.

"Quit stalling," Adam said. By now he was holding the door open for her to go. "Am I ugly?" Betty asked all of a sudden. "You're cute as a button." He touched the flat end of Betty's nose. "Go." Betty lurched off down the hall, blowing her brains out with her finger.

Gabriel was deluded that he had a factory job. I think it might have had some basis in the volunteering he did in the garden at Scalding Court. A factory job would have been a step up. In the New Millenium it represented security and dignity. Gabriel wanted me to do up his schedule. We spent

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

a lot of time at the little round table just filling in the days of the week. Adam was getting ready to go. He usually made a trip to the staff washroom, carrying a Baggie with a toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste wrapped inside it. He said it made him feel fresher, helped him stay awake on the long drive home.

Adam had to leave a few minutes early to make a doctor's appointment. It had something to do with his knees. That, and the fact that it was getting warm, prompted him to get into shorts. I remember him coming back to Gabriel and me after changing. "How do I look?" he asked him, smiling. He laughed. I don't remember that he said anything.

I thought he looked great. He was lanky, with beautiful long legs that were only slightly too thin. They were lightly covered with blond hair that showed up in sunlight. Otherwise they looked smooth. The puffiness around his knees, like the bandage under the brace and the heavy black brace itself, made him more attractive. Of course, I'm speaking for myself. At the time I didn't say anything either.

I noticed that he was still wearing the black socks that he'd worn under the jeans. "Black socks," I said. "They make you look like a banker taking the afternoon off. Pretty nerdy." He agreed. He returned to the main floor washroom. When he got back his feet were bare in his running shoes and he carried the socks in his hand. He had crazy ankles. He stuffed the socks into his "Roots" bag.

Jon Thomas Rowland

"Better?" he asked. This time Gabriel said "Yes."

Just before going downstairs, baggie in hand, Adam stood over us to see what we were doing. He read off the days of the week, pausing before "Thursday," mocking our painstaking. I was helping a man remember the days of the week for a non-existent factory-job.

*

Some nights he went home after cooking one of his special dishes and made Kraft dinner. His special dishes were tacos, pirogies with bacon, chicken fajitas. These were the same dishes he made for his wife, when he had the energy. He'd straighten up the house, and help his wife look for a job, a real one.

*

Gladys ran a mail-order business for Lesbians. Not like the Marbles in the movie. I mean she didn't kidnap young hookers, have her valet impregnate them and sell the product to Lesbian couples. She did have a whole catalogue devoted to sex toys made out of plastic that glowed in the dark. I'm sure she never made any money. She knew that my landlady and her mother were Polish Catholics. She thought religious people were kinky, so she asked me to give them a copy of

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

her catalog. I showed it to them, apologetically. I knew they'd be insulted. They were.

Gladys also sold computers. She said her "company" would assemble whatever the client wanted. Just like Dell. She didn't know the difference between a Pentium IV and a Commodore 64. She said he could assemble a pentium for me for a few hundred dollars. I didn't tell her but I told the manager. I'd just bought one from the Goodwill for five. The market was flooded. I.B.M. wanted out of the business. I knew a competent programmer who couldn't get work. The manager said if I explained that to Gladys it wouldn't make any difference. She wouldn't get it.

Gladys sincerely believed that one day she'd strike it rich. She spent a lot of money on lottery tickets. She was more likely to get rich that way than through any of her business ventures. She was even more likely to get struck by lightning. Nonetheless she was convinced that one day she'd return as a great lady to the little town she came from. She'd have an estate, money, and time. She'd be just like the narrow-minded duchesses who'd helped drive her out before. She was fifty years old. Caspar said the trouble with people like her was they believed in easy solutions. They didn't understand that you had to work for anything good.

*

Jon Thomas Rowland

I helped Adam out with more than just cigarettes. At least I thought I was helping him. Who knows? Perhaps the only thing I know is that I tried. I could have done more. I was limited by fear of giving offense. A terrible inhibition. When I gave him something and he chided me for it, telling me that I had to stop, I insisted that he take it, as long as he wasn't angry. I didn't mind if he was slightly embarrassed, as long as he wasn't angry. He assured me he wasn't. It wasn't even an issue.

I gave him my aquarium, with three goldfish that I'd bought in Chinatown. That was when I really started to help him out. Goldfish were supposed to be lucky.

The next day I asked him how he liked it. He frowned. He liked it. His wife loved it. As soon as she saw him bring it into the house, she insisted on going right away to the pet store for gravel, plants, and other accessories. He'd spent a hundred dollars he hadn't intended to. Now he was totally broke. I think it was the next day that I gave him a few packs for those pictures, and the next morning after that I waited for him on the steps next door, and gave him a whole carton. I wonder if that was a pattern. Maybe I was only putting him deeper in arrears.

One Friday afternoon when we were working in the kitchen I gave him fifty dollars. I laid the bill on the counter. It was pink, like the raw hamburgers we'd been cooking for lunch. I said it was for him. At first he wouldn't take it. He told me

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

to pick it up before it got lost. I could tell he wanted it. I told him to buy himself something for the weekend. He grinned and put it in his pocket.

Or was that a grimace?

He stayed late that shift and reminisced about Stacy, a worker who had died in his sleep a few months ago. He said Stacy stayed late with him a lot. It was as if he didn't want to go home. He was middle-aged, married, with children. It was common.

*

If I made myself an extra cheese sandwich in the kitchen (I made them out of our horrible "Wonder" bread and "plastic" processed cheese slices), he'd chide me, "Young man, that's your second cheese sandwich today." Just as he taught me how to slice a pineapple, he taught me that when you made grilled cheese sandwiches healthy brown bread "just wouldn't do." You had to use white. He'd see me reaching for the loaf of whole wheat bread and say "You don't know what you're doing, do you." I was 10 years older than him. He seems fixed in time and place. I'm still moving, but I'm not conscious of doing anything. I'm not responsible. I let it happen.

I have pictures of Adam. I took the first two in October of 2003, exactly a year before it happened. They show him in his summer attire: a shirt over a T-shirt, short pants, "Adidas" running shoes, white gym socks. By co-incidence that was the last time Adam wore shorts that year. The weather turned cold the very next day and stayed cold till spring.

In the first of these two pictures Adam posed for me. He picked up his "Roots" bag and the bin that he used to carry groceries when he went shopping. I suppose he wanted me to photograph him with things that went with the job. The "Roots" bag and the shopping bin were as emblematic of his job as the plumber's snake was of mine. I thought the latter should be on my coat of arms, if I ever got one. I was always carrying it upstairs to unplug the tenants' toilets. Adam used to follow me in case I needed his experienced help. He'd watch as I attacked the load of reeking shit. He once observed that everyone's smelled the same. Only theirs was worse because of all the meds. Now he stood sideways, in front of the door. He raised the arm that wasn't holding anything and waved his hand as if he were lecturing someone. I shot him.

In the second picture he faces the camera. He faces me. His expression is friendly. He's thanking me for three packs of

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

cigs that I'd just given him. I'd stuffed them into his "Roots" bag when he was out of the office.

Of course there was another story behind his needing cigarettes and not being able to buy them for himself. That would account for his somber appearance in the second set of pictures. I took these at Christmas, without his permission. He hated them. He looks very glum while stringing little lights on the Emile Durkheim Christmas Tree. It should have been a happy task. Money had everything to do with it. He hated Christmas. He thought it was all to do with money. At least that one was his last.

*

The manager made herself hoarse telling the tenants. They took it very well. Alice came to the office with her laundry in a green garbage bag. She wanted some of the soap powder that Karl put in little Baggies as an excuse for being in the office early in the morning. Her laundry consisted of a pair of jeans. She would guard them in the laundry room all afternoon. No one in his right mind would steal them. Maybe that was why. The manager invited her into the office and asked her to sit in one of the crummy chairs reserved for tenants. Some of the staff were afraid of picking up scabies or other bugs by sitting in a chair that a tenant had just sat in. Getting the tenants to clean up was out of the question. They were untouchables.

After the manager told her Alice said it was terrible. She asked how it had happened. The manager lied. She said no one knew. She was afraid the tenants wouldn't be able to take it. Yet they lived such harsh lives. Alice was paranoid and lived in a state of imminent destruction. She was preoccupied with conspiracies. Frederick (not Fred) was always talking about his other bodies. I think he thought he was JFK Jr. He was always talking about how his lips moved in the airplane underwater. He wasn't killed. He was murdered. There were mummy babies under the bed and werewolves at the window. So it went. On her way out Alice apologized for not wearing stockings for Patricia's announcement. I'd noticed when she was sitting opposite me that her feet were bare in dirty sneakers. That was on her mind. The announcement was an occasion. She hadn't been dressed for it.

*

I remember my first shifts. I had a couple of training shifts with Babs and Adam. Babs was a strange, unnerving experience.

I remember one thing about Babs's training. The apple juice goes into the clear pitcher and the orange juice into the blue one. I inadvertently violated this "arrangement" about a year later, on the 4 to midnight shift. As I usually did, after the

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

manager “restructured” the cook, I prepared a roast in our dysfunctional oven. Unfortunately I mixed the gravy in the blue pitcher, the one Babs reserved for orange juice. During shift change I'd asked her to let the roast cook for an hour longer after she came on duty. I'd left the gravy, in the blue pitcher, on the counter. When Babs saw it she flew into a rage. She left an angry red-highlighted note in the common log, addressed to part-time staff from full-time staff (herself), never to use the blue pitcher for anything except orange juice, and never to use the orange juice for anything except breakfast. She subsequently stashed "breakfast only" orange juice in the freezer of the dining room fridge. At least it was used for something besides left-overs. She had many quirks. They ranged from mildly irritating to downright disgusting. She could be mean and bullying.

Adam trained me the next night. I believe Babs hated me. She probably demanded extra pay for “training” me, and told the manager I wouldn't make it. Adam must have decided to give me a chance. At any rate when I went in at midnight I was surprised to find him in the office. He was talking to Gladys, who'd just finished giving him shift change. He almost never worked nights. He'd brought in extra supplies of liquorice twists and hard candy, as well as his usual Lucky Strikes. He smiled at me from his chair by the computer, as if to say he was doing this for me. He was such a nice man.

I know I digress, but this is about Adam. There are things I remember about that night. I remember him sitting in the

Jon Thomas Rowland

office with me and slowly rolling his left pant-leg up over the brace in order to adjust it. I remember following behind him as he did rounds. Every hour he led the way around the house up and down four flights of stairs from basement to third floor. It must have bothered his knees. Still, I remember his sense of humor. He'd been telling me to check that all the windows were locked. He stopped before a window in the rear stairwell and retrieved a baggie that had probably contained a cookie. "Crack cocaine," he muttered.

The next night I worked alone. Gabriel, Jack and Frederick (not Fred) were like sharks that smelled fresh blood, the manager's metaphor for the initiation of a relief person. They went through a lot of relief people. During the day they were only supposed to come for a cigarette, and only on the hour. Frederick (not Fred) didn't even have any cigs. After midnight they weren't supposed to come at all. When I said so, Gabriel told me that it had been changed. The manager said so. It was the rule. I was so naïve that I almost believed him.

I saw Jack looking at Gabriel with that sidelong expression of his that meant something was up. Gabriel was scamming. Jack was usually scamming too. He was what Caspar called a "predator," but he was also a lone hunter. He wasn't sure he wanted to be in on Gabriel's scam, or in with Gabriel at least. He usually got whatever Gabriel had anyway. He was short and slight with a stoop that gave him a slinking air. He was always repeating "I'm a handsome guy" but he was really very

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

ugly. His stringy black hair was often lousy. He wore Buddy Holly glasses one lens of which was either taped in or falling out. His teeth were rotten. There was a large hole in one of his front molars. Doubtless his appetite for sugary coffee had something to do with it. The first thing he did in the morning was hit the big urn in the basement, grab a big restaurant-style dispenser full of sugar, and empty half of it into his cup. He'd slop a sticky trail all the way to the smoking lounge. He was a pig.

"I'm wise," he told me outside the office, a propos of nothing.

"That's good," I said. "Maybe you should go to bed."

"Can't I stay up if I want to? I'm a big boy."

They returned minutes later. When I opened the office door, Frederick (not Fred) screamed and pointed under the round table. "My head! It came off my other body." I couldn't help looking in the direction of his finger. Gabriel looked too, with a simper. Jack just kept smoking. I assured them there was nothing there.

"I'm scared," Jack said, in a hoarse voice. "Wa-a-a-a-h," he balled. He'd decided to get in on it.

*

Some evenings Jack, Gabriel, and Frederick (not Fred) ran to the office from the lounge, terrified by something they'd seen on T.V. Once it was an especially graphic news item, a variety store video of the proprietor getting robbed, beaten, and stabbed. Once it was a movie featuring delusional people who heard voices. Jack would be smoking. He'd say he was glad he wasn't like "that," a murderer or someone with delusions. He'd ask, "Why do people kill?" or "Why do people hear voices?" I'd say I didn't know, but smoking in the hallway was against "House Rules." He'd skulk off, taking the others along.

*

One evening I caught Frederick (not Fred) sobbing in the dining room. He was sitting alone at one of the long white plastic tables that we cleaned with the bleach rag after every meal. There was always one in the bucket on top of the tenants' fridge.

The fridge wasn't used for much else. Many of the tenants didn't eat at meal times. Some of them hardly ate anything at all. I'd cook a roast, slice it on the machine in the kitchen, and serve it with vegetables, mashed potatoes and gravy. The tenants loved potatoes and gravy, but I'd open the fridge and find half a dozen plates of uneaten meat. Some of them couldn't eat it because of their rotten teeth. That was why

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

they liked the peanut butter cookies I baked after midnight. They were soft. Adam liked them too, not because his teeth were bad. He had a sweet tooth. By midnight I'd have to throw out all the left-overs. Otherwise Babs would complain to the manager about the way I'd left the kitchen. She'd even photograph it, with the Polaroid we used to photograph the tenants, and show the pictures to our director at Head Office. 'Tut, tut. The manager always phoned Babs after midnight. They were a couple. Babs called her "dear." That was what she called everyone. Gladys called her "dear" behind her back.

I twisted the bleach rag over the bucket on top of the fridge and started to wipe Frederick (not Fred)'s table. It didn't need it. I'd already wiped it once when I cleaned up right after supper. It was just a way to break the ice, and get him to lift up his head. The bleach stank. It smelled like burnt skin. I burned myself with it once, cleaning the back stairs with my bare hands.

It worked. He slowly raised his head. I asked him what was wrong. He said it was Laura. She loved Louis. She was throwing him aside for Louis, a figment of his imagination. Swift was wrong, if one's own delusions could betray one thus.

When I suggested that it didn't matter, Louis was a bum, Laura could have him if that was what she wanted, Frederick

Jon Thomas Rowland

(not Fred) immediately recovered. I'm undecided about Swift.

When Frederick (not Fred) got up to go upstairs, Julia was mopping the floor. She hadn't put up her warning sign, because (as usual) Babs had put it away "where it belonged." Frederick (not Fred) marched toward the stairs, probably thinking about Louis, and slipped. I heard his broad back flop against the floor like a sack of flour. I bent down. He hadn't hit his head.

He saw me and started to moan. I offered to help him get up, but he said he didn't want to look. He knew there was blood all over. He was probably brain-damaged. I said I didn't think so, but we could discuss it in the office. I'd give him a couple of cigarettes. F-f-free? He felt better already.

*

I learned the routines of the House. They certainly weren't enough, but they represented a starting point. I mean that literally, because I wrote my routines down and printed them out on a word processor, under the heading "Routines." I put them on a clipboard and carried them around for months, although after the first week I rarely if ever looked at them. They were symbolic. I believed that as long as I adhered to them I couldn't backslide as all of the others had, except Adam. Because of their painfully obvious inadequacy

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

every time I referred to them they served as a reminder to do more. They inspired me. Adam noticed my clipboard and observed that I seemed really enthusiastic about the job. The manager noticed it too. She was surprised to see that I was still carrying “that thing” around.

*

I made notes during that first training shift with Babs. On reviewing them now I realize that Babs had backslid from them quite a bit herself, even in the brief time I was there. Before I would have thought that such things as rules, guidelines, routines, and procedures would have been dearly loved and religiously followed by anal women like Babs. Now I realize that they usually stand in their way.

The very first thing I was supposed to do was “come in a few minutes early for shift change.” That meant coming in every night at a quarter to midnight. Babs never came in early, mainly because she hated Gladys, the woman she usually relieved. She sat till the last minute in the Coffee Time, nursing her hot chocolate and plucking her eyebrows, or she did a Lilly Marlene act, waiting where Gladys could see her, under the streetlight on the corner, till it was exactly midnight. She hated the idea of working a few minutes extra for Gladys, even if it was really for the House. She preferred to make Gladys stay late. Gladys hated her for that, and often left her with a mess in the “meds” drawer. They were

Jon Thomas Rowland

just a couple of ridiculous old bitches.

I always came to work fifteen minutes early. Some staff had the cheek to complain about it. I suppose they were afraid I'd walk in on them asleep with their feet up on a chair, or I'd make them look bad, and they'd get fewer shifts. Instead of telling them to follow procedures, the Manager told me not to come in early any more. She said I'd been there long enough that it wasn't necessary. She criticized me for following procedures rather than criticize them for not. Her style of "management" was not self-sacrificing. It was self-saving.

I came in early; otherwise, I thought shift change wouldn't happen. At least that was how I justified it then. Maybe it was my version of "Lilly Marlene."

*

I put on a set of relief keys as soon as I got inside the office. Full-time permanent staff were allowed to keep their own set of keys and even take it home. Babs warned me not to hang it around my neck. Someone could choke me with it. That was probably wishful thinking. I usually tied it to a belt loop. If someone pulled it, it would break off.

No one tried to strangle me with the relief keys. No one tried to steal them either. They didn't unlock anything

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

whose contents anyone would want. They unlocked the kitchen and the pantry but staff were always leaving them open anyway, despite the faded warnings on the doors, not to leave them "open and unattended." There was "pin money" in little yellow envelopes in amounts of one or two dollars in the filing cabinet in the office. It might have amounted to two hundred dollars. The cabinet also contained at least a week's worth of meds for each of the twenty schizophrenic tenants. It had no street value. If you were stupid enough to ingest it you would fall into a coma. Anyone could get into the office by kicking the door. Caspar kicked it all the time.

The cleaner used to forget to return his keys after work. We'd be short a set till he returned next week. I attached an enormous medallion, from a posh local athletic club, hoping he'd be reminded by its weight to remove them. He still took them home, though he must have looked conspicuous on the Thing Street car. Eventually the manager refused to loan him the keys at all. This was a great blow to his pride. He must have regarded the set of keys on its little ribbon as a chain of office like the Lord Mayor of London's, but smaller. In revenge he made more trips than usual, in and out of the office and the storage rooms. Each time I'd have to interrupt my supper preparations and go all the way upstairs and let him in. He wanted the keys back.

I changed the tape in the video recorder on top of the filing cabinet where the meds were. That was for our security. Like the locks it didn't work. The tape was supposed to record what the cameras saw on the front porch and right outside the back door. Most of the time the lights were burnt out because Babs and Gladys were fighting over whose job it was to change the bulb. Consequently the cameras often saw nothing but darkness occasionally illuminated by flares from the matches of tenants smoking on the steps. At other times they saw events.

*

Had the cameras been working they would have filmed innumerable cigarette breaks. Every hour or so Adam would invite the manager to join him in the smoking lounge or on the porch. When I wasn't working I often saw them there on my way in or out of my flophouse next door. I'd say hello and ask them how it was going. Later, if Adam was alone, he'd tease me about something and toss me his empty cigarette pack.

Michael often sat on the top step and smoked. He was what Caspar called "passive-aggressive." He played the victim to get his way. His squeaky little voice incensed Serge, who considered it beneath his dignity to work for people who didn't have any pride. Every time he heard that voice,

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

usually begging for enough change to make a quarter so he could buy a cigarette, it reminded him that what he did was degrading.

It was a role. When Michael didn't get the change from Caspar he'd walk out onto the sidewalk and solicit the passersby. He'd return with enough for a pack. He wouldn't buy a whole pack at once, but only two or three cigarettes. It was more controlling that way. He could bother us all day. He'd never come for his cigarettes on the hour but always a few minutes too late or too early. He'd track us down and interrupt whatever we were doing in the kitchen. He forced us to break our own "House Rules" just to get rid of him.

Once he had his cigarette he didn't seem to care. He'd take a few puffs and throw it away. It was an excuse for sitting on the front steps, breaking another rule. Adam warned him that if he caught him there he'd cut him off cigarettes for a whole day. Then he decided that he'd cut him off the "kitchen program." He wouldn't let him peel potatoes or make salad. Cutting him off cigarettes only meant he'd buy from the Koreans on the corner. Cutting him off "the program" meant he'd have no money from us to buy with. He'd still get money though. We were only, as we used to say, "slowing him down."

Now Michael sits on the steps more than ever, or maybe I notice it more. I'm sensitive about it. In the winter he had great salt stains on the seat of his pants. I told Adam he had

Jon Thomas Rowland

a salty crack. Yesterday Michael asked me for a cigarette. I said no. I mentioned that I'd noticed him sitting on the steps. I thought he was inconsiderate. He tossed what was left of his cigarette, nearly all of it. "Sorry," he said. In a man's normal speaking voice. I wish the camera could have caught it.

*

It was a few minutes after 6 o'clock. I had just returned from the Goodwill down Thing Street. I removed my knapsack and put it on my porch, entered the narrow passage between my house and the House, and carried a green bag of garbage to the boulevard. Michael came out of the House and sat down on the front steps, where anyone else coming out of the House would trip over him. He was smoking as usual, taking rapid shallow puffs on his cigarette, which he'd throw away half smoked, or leave to scorch the mat.

He knew he annoyed me, sitting where Adam always told him not to. I asked him if he remembered how he knocked at my door on Sunday afternoon, to invite me to take him for a walk. I'd buy him a coffee at a coffee shop in the neighborhood where they had a glassed-in smoking section. He'd always say it didn't matter, he was quitting, but I always made sure I had a pack of cigarettes. The last time I also bought him a chocolate éclair. He said I couldn't imagine

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

how long he'd been waiting for one. I told him he should go shopping, then he could get Caspar to buy him whatever he wanted. I knew he'd rather wait. They also serve, who do.

At the end of every walk he'd tell me how unhappy he was. Outside the people in the cars were too sexual. They stared at him because he was in his pajamas. Inside they pushed him around. He was so quiet and so small. I'd seen him approach strangers without even looking to see who they were. He'd march out of the House and ask the first people he met for a hand-out. He'd get it too. I wouldn't agree. I'd say he was quiet but no push-over. Then I'd give him a few cigarettes. That was what he wanted.

He remembered. Then forget it, I said.

*

Last summer Velvet would call my name when she saw me coming up the walk at night. I'd be on the porch and hear her disembodied voice in the dark. She sat on the second floor balcony of the House. Frederick (not Fred) or Gabriel would join her. Michael would sit by himself on the tiny third floor balcony. In the morning both yards would be littered with dented Coke cans.

None of the bedrooms was air-conditioned. Sam's "Health and Safety" committee insisted that all the windows be

Jon Thomas Rowland

"secured." I wondered if they were afraid of elopements, but that was silly. There was no need to lock the windows when the tenants were free to use the door. They could come and go at any hour. Many exercised that freedom.

Lance was a big, courteous man from some island, I don't know which. Maybe England. His was one of those bodies that I regularly saw flashing on the way to the toilet. I was used to his bare ass. I would hear him leave early in the morning. I never saw him go, because by then I'd be working in the kitchen. I'd be baking those peanut butter cookies that Adam liked. Lance would usually go downtown to City Hall. He had a "complex" about our mayor. He believed he was in some kind of trouble. Lance wanted to warn him. He'd wait for the mayor to come to work but I don't think they ever met. The mayor's handlers wouldn't have allowed it.

Serge said Lance smelled like a dog. He didn't mean he stank. He smelled like a dog that lived outdoors and slept in the grass. After waiting for the mayor Lance would go to sleep in some park. I never saw him do a laundry. He'd throw his laundry in the garbage and get new clothes at the pound store. At a dollar a pound it was probably cheaper to buy them. He saved his money for cigarettes. He was the only tenant I sold them to after midnight. I thought it would have been unfair not to, since he slept all day. I also gave him credit, because he always paid me back.

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

Velvet was a different story. She'd originally been as good as Lance, but she deteriorated after she got some kind of liver trouble. She had Barrie's disease. She'd known Barrie, and she knew Barrie's disease. If Velvet had the same thing, she knew she was fucked.

I knew as soon as I recognized her voice that Velvet wanted a cigarette. She was too embarrassed to ask outright because she already owed me and she was basically a good woman. She'd promised to pay me back as soon as she got her money from the hospital. She'd always done so before, but not this time. She was slipping. When I gave her five dollars off the little roll I kept in my pocket she got nostalgic for the times when she had money. She wasn't jealous. She just remembered the times when she had a roll too. I think she appreciated the memory almost as much as the money. The memory would last longer. She'd spend the five dollars immediately. There'd be a feeding frenzy for cigarettes. She couldn't say no.

A little while ago I loaned her a few packs of cheap "Native" cigarettes. We agreed that I'd leave them in the office. She could have no more than one an hour. She was to ask for it at the top of the hour, like everyone else who had cigarettes in the office. If she missed the hour, it was too bad. They weren't retroactive. The deal was she had to replace them once they were gone. This is what she hadn't done. She didn't care. It was understandable. She was an old woman, and she was dying.

She'd go AWOL for three or four days. Then suddenly she'd be back. She started to trick the money people at the hospital. She'd get her whole pin money allowance for the month. Then she'd go back fifteen minutes later, ask a different worker, and get it again. Velvet would sneak up the dark-varnished stairs while Serge was talking to the Anglo girlfriend on his cell. Then Serge would phone the cops.

I offered her a couple of cigarettes. She came downstairs and we stood and talked for a while on adjacent porches.

She'd been a hairdresser in the 70's. It was a better world. There were more drugs in it. She and her boyfriend took them in their basement apartment, listening to rock. Her friend shot someone after an argument and wound up in an asylum for the criminally insane. Velvet was cruising down the highway on the back of someone's Harley and it was as if one of her thoughts leapt out of her head into the road in front of them and pulled them through the windshield. I imagined her frozen in the headlights of an on-rushing thought. She was mental road kill.

First it was Barrie and Adam, then it was Velvet and me. The camera didn't work, or it would have filmed the same scene over and over again.

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

The camera could have filmed worse things. Once Collin came back drunk from a bar frequented by pimps, hookers, and pushers. He had his Discman on. He loved rap music. He was black, from a middle-class black family. Every few months his father pulled up in an expensive sports car in front of the house and waited for Collin to come out. He never went in. It was too depressing. His mother wanted the doctor to be sure to give him lots of Prozac before he came home for a visit. He was too depressed.

Collin hated Gladys. Gladys (obviously) was a woman. She could be shrill. She could spill the "meds" she was offering a tenant, and then get all upset about it as if it was the tenant's fault. I don't think Collin was sexist. He acted like people in the rap music he was always listening to. When they were angry with their women they called them "ho's." Collin was already high on whatever he'd been consuming at the local bar, as well as the music. When he saw Gladys, he got angry and called her "ho."

I think Collin neglected to consider that the people in the rap music calling one another "ho" were nearly all black. He resembled a typical middle-class American college kid. He was tall, handsome, and athletic. The laundress who worked at the house part-time couldn't forebear calling him "cutie." Gladys should have been glad to be called "ho" by him. But he was black.

Jon Thomas Rowland

When Collin called Gladys "ho" it was like a slap in the face from way across the color divide. That made it sting.

I believe Collin meant nothing by it. Once in the dining-room he asked me if I were married. I said no. He asked me if I had a girlfriend. I said no. He asked me if I had a boyfriend. I said no. Finally he asked me if I wanted one. I said no, I was a loner. He hadn't been nosy or insulting. He'd been sympathetic. It was all natural to him. I don't think he had any prejudice.

I heard him talking to Adam one evening. Collin was crouching by the garbage cans outside the office. Adam was bending over him. I had just emerged from the office where I'd been dispensing supper-time meds. Collin was angry. He said he just wanted to go home. He missed his family. He didn't like it here. Adam said he understood. He was sorry. There was nothing he could do. I thought I detected genuine sympathy. From what I now know about Adam, it was.

Adam told me, I think in the course of our discussion about suicide, that he'd never been "that way." He'd had "reality problems." Something happened to Adam when he was a teenager, after which he referred to himself as "high school Adam." He'd dropped out.

*

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

None of this really matters in terms of what the camera could have seen. I saw it, because I was watching from the porch next door. Instead of getting off the porch herself, Gladys told Collin to. They "escalated," to use mental health-care jargon. He slapped her face.

Gladys was shocked, and the police were useless. They became hostile when I wouldn't give them my date of birth. I hadn't done anything wrong except call them. I worked there. I lived next door. I'd been standing on my porch. I saw it all. "You live next door to this?" The bad cop demanded, as if I'd committed a series of crimes and that was the culmination.

When I wouldn't give them Collin's file the bad cop suggested I review my training. I considered suggesting that he review his own, especially the part under neighborhood policing. Instead I said I was sorry but, according to my training, for reasons of confidentiality I couldn't release the tenant's file without a "Form 14." They knew that. The good cop looked worried for his colleague, as if he thought he'd lost face and didn't know where he'd recover it.

Out of reach of the non-recording cameras I talked to Collin about what had happened. He said he guessed he'd really messed up this time. Now he'd never get to go home.

The police joined us a few minutes later. The bad cop

Jon Thomas Rowland

aggressively interrogated Collin about drugs. I supposed because he was black. Collin hadn't taken any street drugs lately. He was on powerful antipsychotic medication. The cop offered his opinion that Collin's "meds" needed adjustment. I said it had just been done, after a two week re-assessment. I gave him the name of Collin's psychiatrist in case he wanted to discuss it with him.

When I told them that Collin had been diagnosed with schizophrenia the lead cop fatuously demanded to know "which subtype." If he'd really known anything about it he'd have known that such things barely mattered. They changed from one assessment to the next.

The cops took Collin away in hand-cuffs, although it was clear he'd spent his rage. I was glad I hadn't told them he'd been diagnosed with "schizophrenia-paranoid subtype."

I wondered what the camera had caught of this event. The anger? The violence? The bad policing? The ignorance? The waste?

The cops returned to the house a few minutes later. The bad cop was gloating and the good one was beaming with admiration. The bad cop explained that Collin would be back in an hour. He only needed a little anger management. They turned around, broke wind, and departed.

They'd obviously just dropped Collin off at the hospital

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

without telling anyone what he'd done. I immediately got on the phone and tried to deal with the doctor who'd released him. At first he wouldn't even give me his name, although he wanted all kinds of information from me, which I wasn't allowed or even qualified to release. The "meds" information on the back of Collin's dosette was way out of date any way. When I told him what Collin had done he said people beat up people in bars every day and they didn't get committed. I wanted to say that I wasn't talking about the general population. This man had a mental illness and he was a doctor. But by then Collin was "acting out" with them too and it was a different story. I never saw him again.

Later that morning I tried to view the tape but it was illegible.

*

The next item on my clipboard was the T.V. lounge. Babs always shut it down and kicked everybody out at midnight. When I showed that to Adam he said it was wrong. The tenants had the right to watch T.V. This was their home. I never locked the T.V. lounge. I never removed the item from the list either. It was a starting point.

Shortly after midnight I was supposed to do a round. I had to make sure there were no guests malingering in the tenants' rooms. Joan was apt to have a client of her own, or at least

Jon Thomas Rowland

another tenant. She was sure to be smoking, which was even more forbidden. During rounds I would clutch the relief keys that hung from the ribbon dangling from my belt loop. I didn't want them to rattle. They made me feel like a cat with a bell on its collar, unable to catch mice. I'd walk softly as I approached Joan's door and very quietly insert the master key into her lock. Then I'd tap on her door and enter immediately without waiting for permission. I wanted to catch her.

Sometimes Frederick (not Fred) was there. After they got used to me, Joan would just keep smoking. Frederick (not Fred) would assure me that they weren't having sex. Joan was a virgin.

I also had to check the balconies. I'm not sure what for. It was something Babs did. I was supposed to shut and lock all the doors and make sure the windows on the stairways were all locked. Alice always did that herself. Her worldly possessions consisted of one dress, a few pairs of jeans and some T shirts. Nonetheless she would lock her door several times before leaving her room. She wouldn't let me sweep the floor unless she was there. She kept piles of old newspapers on an old coffee-table in her room. They were the classified sections. She was looking for another room. She saved them, although she never looked at them except just before I made her throw them out. Then she would open every page, study it, and stuff it into a green garbage bag. It would take her all day to throw out the pile.

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

Maybe she thought she was a support worker. Shortly before midnight she made her own rounds, locking every window and door, not once but thrice. Because I came a few minutes early, I'd hear her at it. If I tried to interrupt her, she'd pretend to be on her way to the toilet. If I asked her why she didn't use the one on her own floor, she'd say it was plugged. It usually was. Checking the toilets was also on my list.

*

It was 8:15 on a February morning. I had been on duty since midnight. Babs had been a case worker at head office. It was hard to imagine anyone at head office as a case worker. They were too out of touch. They wouldn't even have made good clients. Babs hadn't been popular at head office. That could have been a recommendation. She could have been better than they were. She was worse.

Babs described them to me after the poker game that was her farewell party. Of course I'd already met the manager. I can describe her myself. She was British. She said "yes, yes right" a lot, pronouncing it "royt." I heard her at the unofficial wake he and some other head office characters arranged for us. I think it was really to assuage their guilt. She was a socialite, a suit. Otherwise she couldn't have held his position. She "tut-tutted" a lot. Schizophrenia. What a

Jon Thomas Rowland

waste, tut tut. She was the biggest waste himself.

Harriet Parsons was our manager's manager. She was short, dark and dykey. She even had a little beard. She resembled a civil servant dressed for summer vacation in the tundra, circa 1950. A mannish civil servant. Her clothes looked comfortable but she looked uneasy. She ran several company properties, into the ground. The nursing home was typical. The company flagship, they should have called it "Titanic." The building was owned by the mafia. The maintenance was contracted out to a mob of incompetents. Even Caspar was impressed. Harriet had to vacate it suddenly with thirty elderly schizophrenic tenants. They took up residence in a building in a remote gang-ridden suburb. It was run by psychopaths. One morning a female tenant screamed and vomited breakfast. There was bleach in her orange juice.

Queenie was the property manager. She reminded me of a female Terry Thomas. Another dykey mustache, this time over a toothy leer. Hadn't any of them heard of Joline? Queenie squired prospective tenants around the property. She was sarcastic and fussy. I remember when she introduced me to Pierre. I offered him my hand. He shied away. Queenie said "Thank you, Norman." Tut, tut. She should have told me that Pierre never shook hands. It was one of his obsessions.

Queenie and Harriet were the Joan and Darby of Emile

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

Durkheim House. Babs said she found their co-dependency oppressive. It was one of the reasons why she left head office. I experienced it during the wake. Two land-rovers pulled up at the curb. In the office they appeared to be reading a dialogue from an old script they knew by heart. Harriet couldn't believe it. Adam! By his own hand. He was always so cheerful. Yes, Queenie gushed. He was charming. The manager sat between them trying to look sad.

*

Babs should have relieved me at a quarter to. Instead of apologizing she went straight to the schedule that the manager had taped to the cupboard above the computer. She squealed that she didn't have enough hours. She needed more. Then she immediately calmed down. She'd talk to Harriet. She'd make it right.

Then she lowered her immense bulk into Adam's chair beside the computer. I began shift change. At almost every name, she said that tenant shouldn't even be here. That one wasn't truly mentally ill. That one was developmentally delayed. That one had a drug problem. That one was an alky. She was trying to show me what a great case worker she was. I was impressed. Caspar said she shouldn't criticize. Her features were distinctly Mongoloid. She had Down's Syndrome. She shouldn't have been there either.

Jon Thomas Rowland

Babs and Gladys could have been twins, except one was light and one was dark. I don't even remember which.

*

Things came to a crisis in February. I relieved Caspar. Serge had been on earlier, with Babs.

The manager was lazy about scheduling. She was lazy about everything. She'd stick the schedule on the cupboard over the computer for the relief staff to fill in as they came to it. It was easy for her but hard on anyone who came to it after greedy people. Such were Serge and Babs. They had a feeding frenzy.

I put my complaint in writing and reviewed it with Adam. He told me to tone down some passages about Babs. They were too personal. Besides, everyone hated her already. I retyped the letter and taped it to the computer where the manager couldn't miss it.

*

The manager lived in Best Lodge. It was a high-rise feudally mismanaged by the worthless crackhead scions of Boris Ulyanov Fillmore, Vaslav and Ivan. It was the United Nations under terrorist attack with all the interpreters on

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

strike. The front door was always bashed in or missing, like an old man's bloody dentures after somebody kicked him in the mouth.

Moving vans full of fertilizer pulled up and stalled at the illuminated fountain in the circular driveway. Somebody poured cream soda into the water. It foamed and frothed like the memorial of the war between Iran and Iraq.

Patricia Stinker, the lady Scrooge, was doing her accounts, checking up on her investments, the sinking fund. She heard a commotion, banging and scraping in the street twenty stories below. She peered out through the lace curtains of a lace-curtain Irish woman. Half naked in just her brassiere, smooth shoulders gleaming in the winter twilight, it was Mildred dragging an iron bed-frame down the street. She'd just plundered it from the Best Lodge dumpster. She was drunk. She shouted at the by-standers that they were bums.

*

The manager sulked, and wouldn't invite me to any more cigarette breaks with herself and Adam. A few days later Adam had to leave early for one of his periodic fund-raising meetings. He hated them. They usually concerned arrangements for a charity concert. The music was always classical. The venue was always a particular Anglican church on Spoor Street. He called Scriabin Scabies, believers were

Jon Thomas Rowland

just as dirty as everyone else, and the Anglican clergy were predominately fags. This time there was no chance he meant they were cigarettes. Except for the Scriabin, I thought he was typically accurate and fair, but I wondered why he bothered. Maybe it was the same reason why he tolerated Eugenia asking him "What means bacon?" He thought it was his job. He wished me luck.

After he'd gone the manager told me we'd discuss my letter as soon as she'd finished the meat order. Actually she was counting the cigarettes. She could have been doing her nails. We sat in the office. She wanted to know what had brought this on. She looked hurt. She was in victim mode. Caspar called it "passive-aggressive." I was getting screwed, but she felt sorry. I thought it was obvious. Babs had left her job for a while six months ago. When she came back she should have gone to the end of the queue. Instead she was getting preferential treatment. She got first pick of the available shifts and as many as she squealed for. The manager said she was helping her out on compassionate grounds. Compassion for whom? Help her to somebody else's shifts, I said. I knew Patricia was helping herself by taking the easy way out, buying the peace with my shifts. She said I wasn't seeing things from her perspective. I said I was. I just didn't like what I saw. I wasn't even in the picture, only my shifts were, and they weren't mine any more.

*

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

He stood outside the door. He said he was dead. He said you'd be dead too, if you were shot in the head. He was sweating in a black raincoat over a nylon ski-jacket. Sweat beaded his brow, dribbled down his chin, caught in his whiskers. I wanted him to remove at least one of his coats. At first he refused. Then he said all right. I'll strip. Bastard! He tugged at the buttons. He threw the raincoat at me. Then he popped the metal buttons of the ski jacket and threw it at me too. I meekly folded them over my arm like a waiter. I carried them up the dark-varnished stairs to his room and hung them neatly in his closet. Like a valet, or a chamber maid.

When I returned to the main floor he was still hovering around the office door. He stared blankly at the clock in the hallway, wondering when he could get his next cigarette. I told him to go away, to sit in the lounge, to watch TV. He told me to fuck off. I said calm down to his broad back as he retreated down the hall into the lounge. I heard him damn me to hell, call me bastard and atheist. He read the bible regularly. He was saved. He was a lawyer, an I.T. Specialist.

*

Jack was handsome, and good-natured. He never caused any trouble, except everyone noticed that when he was away the house was a lot calmer, and a lot cleaner. There were no

Jon Thomas Rowland

trails of coffee slopped from the dining room to the lounge. Fewer things got stolen. In fact nothing got stolen when Jack wasn't around. Gabriel even had enough pin money after supper to buy herself a coffee at Dino's. Usually Jack just took it. He even stole the manager's cigarettes. He'd light up right outside the big bay office window in plain view of staff. He wanted everyone to know. He was a good guy. He went to the food bank. He told the Holy Fathers that we didn't feed him. He was hungry. "Wa-a-a-ah." He returned with enough food for a small needy family. He opened the jars of peanut butter and the canned goods. He sampled their contents with his finger and left them to go bad on his dresser. Everything went bad. I had to go into his room to throw them out before they drew vermin. When I warned him that food in the room was against House rules he acted astonished. Couldn't he make himself a sandwich? He was a good guy. Not to mention handsome, and good-natured. He knew the rules. That's why he did it. Jack was cut off cigarettes.

"Staff entered client's room during room check at 6 P.M. and smelled smoke. Staff observed plume of smoke rising behind bed. Upon investigation Staff discovered client had wrapped lit cigarette in paper towel and inserted towel between mattress and wall. Staff informed client that setting fires in room was against House Rules. Client expressed dismay at Staff's apparent inability to evict from his room arsonists and other trespassers, some of whom were vocal and engaged him in endless long arguments."

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

Jack went out and sold some weed. He got his cigarettes. It amazed me but he still had a good head for business. My neighbor walking his dog in the morning regularly met Jack emerging from the alley with one of his own clients. He was a good guy all right.

*

Serge said the manager was just an old hippie. For once he got it right, but he put the wrong spin on it. Poor Serge. He meant that hippies were good because they were easy-going. They didn't get angry when you were late for shift change. I hated hippies. They were worse ass-holes than Serge himself. Serge once gave me a book by David Suzuki. The cheek. I'm convinced that Serge and the manager joined the Green Party out of parsimony.

The manager was obsessive about the cigarette money. I used to go to a variety store across from the Asylum and buy contraband "Native" cigarettes. The staff then sold them out of the office, for a little more than what they cost. This meant that Frederick (not Fred) didn't have to pay fifty cents for a cigarette from the Koreans on the corner, and the money he made in the "kitchen program" went a lot farther. In a few minutes he could panhandle enough for a pack. When all the cigs were gone I took the money out of the little blue dish and bought some more.

Patricia started to use my cigarette money as a float. This

Jon Thomas Rowland

meant that she was always dipping into it to pay the tenants for kitchen work. She had a bad memory, especially when it came to other people's money. I believe she shorted the cig money herself, then used the shortage as an excuse to take the money home with her. I think she slept with it.

Then a so-called Front Line Worker got busted by a Canada Customs commissar for buying contraband cigs. Caspar said he'd been snitched on by a colleague. That was their "M.O." The fine was twenty-four hundred bucks and a criminal record. Caspar probably had one already.

*

Caspar was a womanizer. Anyone was a womanizer compared to me, if he was straight. Caspar wanted to teach English in a former Eastern Block country because Slavic women were so beautiful. He'd worked in Sicily but it was too dangerous. He thought Czechoslovakia would be just right.

He sent faxes from the dysfunctional fax machine on top of the "meds" cabinet, and e-mails from the computer beside Adam's chair. The faxes and e-mails attracted a lot of advertisers, with pitches on the level of "Bright Boy Wanted." Patricia resented the expense. I'm sure she suspected me. Officially I wasn't supposed to have a password to get onto the internet, but Adam gave me his to

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

use. I did searches using "gay" and "psych survivor" as keywords, and visited the sites that came up. I knew that Queenie would have trouble complaining about those.

One evening Caspar lingered in the office after I relieved him at a quarter to midnight. He talked about his template. He meant his type. Socrates discusses it in the Phaedrus, where he defends the mad lover. It was lover, angel and demon. Caspar said his "academic advisor" had been his type. I said the real ones always were, only they were called satyrs. Adam was mine. My Mentor, despite his smooth legs.

*

Joan raved about having no head, no arms, no legs. She was short and dumpy. She thought she was hot. She had a dapper mustache like Queenie's. She wore her hair in a 50s-style bee-hive that looked half as tall as she was. She was always spraying it with one of the dozens of aerosol cans that she stored in the drawers under her bed. She also had all kinds of perfume. It was all highly flammable and Joan had a smoking problem.

During room check staff found butts and paper garbage smoldering between client's radiator and the wall. All we could do was evict her. Patricia would write her a letter.

*

Samantha finally left for St. Onan's Center. It was her "beauty spa." At least it wasn't another flop like Emile Durkheim House. She'd been aggressive to Adam. She said she wanted to kill him and his wife. Especially his wife. Then they could get married. She'd known him for years, as his client in another House. Adam was her scapegoat and lover combined. When she was delusional she called the imaginary friend, who held the door open and waited for her, "Adam." Sitting in the lounge with Adam and me during one of Adam's regular cigarette breaks, Samantha started to swear at the news announcer on CNN. It wasn't Dan Rather. That much was certain. Adam asked her to watch her language.

She told Adam to fuck off, and reminded him that she was going to kill him and his wife, but not in that order. Adam said she was skating on very thin ice. Samantha stormed out of the lounge.

Then she came to us in the office. She apologized to Adam for threatening him and asked him to please call the police right away next time. Adam said he didn't want to call the police. It wasn't necessary. He said Samantha should stop taking out her frustration on others every time she ran out of money. Samantha said it wasn't money. She was feeling suicidal. She wanted a "PRN" and a subway token. The

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House
usual prescription.

Adam said he knew that if he handed her five dollars she'd go to McDonald's and have a coffee. Samantha slowly shook her towering beehive as if only she knew the full story, and it was complicated and very sad. She said, wearily, "No, Adam, I don't think so. I don't think so." Adam got her a sedative from her bottle in the filing cabinet and some water in a paper cup. He gave her a token from the House pouch. "Thank you, Adam," she said, at her politest. "But next time I want you to call the police immediately." Adam said he would if he thought it was necessary. Samantha wiggled her fingers at us from the doorway. I thought she was going to ask us to call her a cab, then she was off.

I told the manager that I thought just giving Samantha the five dollars, which after all was what she really wanted, would save "the system" a lot of money. Patricia said I obviously didn't know "the system" very well. "The system" had the bed either way. Putting up Samantha merely justified it.

*

I'd just dispensed the six o'clock "meds." Karl always wanted his before supper at 4:30. He really wanted them earlier, before Gladys arrived at 4:00, but we wouldn't give them to her. We used to, but it confused Gladys. Gladys was easily confused. Without checking the "meds" sheets or even

Jon Thomas Rowland

looking at the dosette in her hand, she'd give the tenants their evening meds, thinking they were their 6 o'clock meds. The tenants would be too addled to remember that they'd already had their 6 o'clock meds at 4. No less addled herself, Gladys would try to give them their evening meds again at 10 o'clock. She'd finally look at the dosette, notice that the meds for the day were all gone, and accuse someone else of handing them out. She was Mother Hubbard.

Samantha always got her "meds" right after supper. To-night she waited outside while Mack counted his pills on the little round table where the manager counted the cigarette money and Babs prepared the pin money envelopes. There were nine. They ranged in size from tiny yellow clozapine tablets to large football-shaped lozenges. Mack took his time. He asked me if I thought he was going to get better. I said I hoped so. He asked me for some of the peanuts that I had in a plastic container on the mantle. He already had his snack in his knapsack. I'd given him two muffins. Everyone else got one. I poured the peanuts onto a napkin where the pills had been. He thanked me. He wouldn't get better if he didn't stop eating so much.

Mack folded the nuts in the napkin and put them in his knapsack with his muffins and cigarettes. I looked up and saw Samantha scowling behind the reinforced glass. Mack was talking about his other selves. He said he was a lot of different men. Some of them were bad. They said bad things about us. He tried not to listen, because he was good.

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

He wanted to think that we were good too. I said I hoped so. I knew he was good.

He was good-hearted. He had a few friends among the tenants. He'd give each one twenty dollars on his birthday. That was a fortune for someone on disability. He was very sensitive. Last Christmas he was sitting alone in the dining room and broke down sobbing. The manager blamed Christmas. It was hard on us.

He had style. He wasn't tall. He was huge. He wore baggy dress-pants of shiny dark material. I gave him an old fedora. He wore it with a white shirt and a vest. He resembled a gangster. When I cleaned his room I was impressed by all the clothes he had. They broke the rack in his closet, towered in the plastic bins on his dresser, and spilled over onto his room-mate's bed. There was something amoebic about the way his wardrobe spread. Not about its size.

He was very lazy. Cleaning his room I smelled something under a heap of garbage at the foot of the bed. He'd buried his waste basket under empty potato chip bags, crumpled cigarette packs, and dirty socks. In it was a desiccated turd. He'd "pinched one" (as Adam liked to say) in his room. It hurt to imagine his enormous ass looming over the tiny basket. I tried not to. I wanted to be good. Samantha wiggled her fingers behind the glass. It was time Mack went.

Mack could have been a pimp. I got acquainted with his girlfriend before I worked in the House. She was always around to see Mack or Barrie. The first time I saw Barrie he was smoking a joint on the front lawn of the drop-in centre down the street. He usually sat on the front steps of Emile Durkheim House. I talked to him there almost every day one summer two years ago. I had lost my job selling antiques in a crazy store on Thing Street because the owner was too busy chasing women to buy me anything to sell. He was cunt struck.

I was running a flea market in my front yard to raise rent money. Barrie was amused when I asked him to watch my stuff while I went inside for lunch. One weekend he robbed eleven variety stores. In jail he'd been brain-damaged in a fight and he'd contracted hepatitis from dirty needles. By the end of the summer I'd run out of stuff to sell. I had a few photograph albums with photos of someone else's long-dead family. Barrie looked over at them with disgust. He thought no one would buy them.

I was sitting on my porch next door, guarding my inventory. It was the early afternoon. Barrie had gone inside. He didn't eat anything for lunch. He drank a can of "Insure" a day.

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

That was all. He was losing weight.

A pair of "Doc Martins" hurled over the second floor balcony of the House next door. They landed in my sales area. A woman shouted. I recognized Charlene's voice, and the hail of tapes, sheet music, and clothing. I heard wood splintering. Finally, pieces of her guitar hurtled into the yard, as at the conclusion of a rock concert.

Caspar came out of the House. That was the first time I saw him. He was wearing a name tag as well as a set of relief keys. I'm glad they got rid of the tags before I came to work. Caspar strode into the yard. He clasped his hands behind his back. I saw he wasn't bad looking but with a trace of nerdiness thanks to his glasses. I was probably worse, always holding a book and trying to read. My sale attracted some very stupid people. It helped to have something to read.

Caspar introduced himself. He apologized for the behavior of his client. He asked me to please call the police if it happened again. I thought that was his job. I told him not to worry. I could have sold the shoes. Barrie started to laugh. He'd been there all morning, and I hadn't noticed.

*

One day in September Barrie wasn't on the steps. His worker drove him to the House that afternoon. He got out

Jon Thomas Rowland

of the car and went straight into the House without acknowledging me or talking to Frederick (not Fred) and Karl who were loitering on the porch. I was packing up my unsold family albums when I saw him come outside with Adam. I heard Barrie say that he was fucked. Adam was carrying his black "Roots" bag, on his way home. I noticed the brace. Adam said everyone we were all fucked.

The next day on the porch, Barrie asked me if I thought he'd see fifty. He said he'd been diagnosed with cancer. During the few months that he had left I got acquainted with his and Mack's friend, Deloris. Deloris tolerated me because I liked Barrie. Sometimes she was drunk. She'd take my hand and hold it too long. Then she'd say something mean. She took Barrie drinking a few last times, since it didn't matter anymore what happened to his liver. They got into an argument, and Barrie slapped her. She must have been a bad drunk.

Deloris turned up where she wasn't supposed to be. She wouldn't ring the door-bell and check in with the staff as guests were supposed to do. She didn't consider me staff or herself a guest. She would enter the lounge where Mack sprawled in front of the T.V., watching a game. She'd make herself at home with coffee, and get into a fight with Karl. Karl was jealous and refused to shut up when Deloris was around. I'd follow Deloris into the lounge, or find her there, and ask her to go back and ring the door-bell. Karl would be screaming for her to go. Usually she'd leave. Adam said I

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House
was being a prick. I disliked Deloris. Mack was indifferent.

*

Mack lumbered past Samantha without acknowledging her. He began his daily ascent of the dark-varnished stairs. He came down in the morning and stayed down till bed-time, which was right after supper. There was nothing else to do till breakfast. Samantha held the door longer than necessary. She sighed "Come on, Adam." Adam was somewhere on the road to Ossington.

Samantha waited while I retrieved her "meds" file from the stack of "six o'clock meds" beside the photo-copier, removed her dosette from the filing cabinet, and poured the water into a Dixie cup. I showed her her name on the dosette before tapping the pills from the 6 o'clock slot into her cupped hand. She clapped the hand with the pills over her mouth, accepted the Dixie cup and swallowed the water. She even showed me the inside of her mouth, something Gladys wanted me to ask everyone to do. I never did. Caspar said the tenants had been in the asylum most of their lives. They were too good at "cheeking" to get caught like that. Gladys would take me aside to warn me that a particular tenant was cheeking his meds. They all were.

Then Samantha asked me for a "PRN." She was at her politest. She used her little girl voice. She was apologetic

Jon Thomas Rowland

and ingratiating. She waved her hand and wiggled her fingers. She was a con. I said I didn't want to give her medication she didn't need. She said she really needed it. She was beginning to be very anxious. She didn't have any money. I told her to wait half an hour. If she still felt anxious we'd see about that "PRN."

She came back half an hour later. She said she was feeling suicidal. Did I think she should call St. Onan's? Maybe I should call the police.

I told her that she shouldn't call St. Onan's either. She seemed to be increasing her requests. Compared to calling the Centre, the sedative almost looked like a good idea. It was brilliant compared to the police. They made me anxious and I didn't have a "PRN."

Samantha accepted the "PRN" as a favor to me. She really thought I should call St. Onan's to get her a "reservation." Then I should call the police to get her an escort, because it was a long way to walk and she was fragile. With her big heavy body and facial hair, she resembled a female teamster. She was a con, a thug. She frightened the other tenants. She'd hold the smoking room door open for her imaginary friend and sigh "Come on, Adam."

Samantha's friend was a version of Adam that she had constructed out of a relationship that went back many years. She had been Adam's client at other houses before Emile

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

Durkheim House. They had been together at the notorious "Fifth Street Housing and Support Services," whose manager drove a new Mercedes while the workers (Adam included) hadn't had a raise in ten years, and where one day the tenants' case histories were abandoned on the boulevard. They blew around the neighborhood for weeks.

Samantha had a "real" boyfriend, with wasted lady-killer features. I think all along she probably wanted to visit him, but was too lazy to go on her own and too shrewd to think anyone would loan her bus fare for that. Kurt stole credit cards and gave them to Samantha. He calculated that if Samantha got caught she wouldn't get punished because she was mentally ill. Kurt was staying in a men's shelter downtown, but Samantha had another boyfriend named Edward.

*

When their money was gone, and Edward didn't have any more to loan them, Kurt stole his things and pawned them. Then Edward would call Samantha to demand restitution. Samantha would try to repay him out of her pin money. It would take months. Most of that time she'd be wretchedly broke. She'd pace up and down outside the House, looking for someone to loan her a dollar for a coffee, or a quarter for a cigarette.

Jon Thomas Rowland

Kurt would disappear, but Edward would call us half a dozen times every evening, wanting to talk to Samantha. She didn't want to talk to him, and we weren't allowed to tell him anything. He'd beg us to use our "telepathy" to bring him to the phone. Caspar would stare at the phone as if it repulsed him. Then he'd hang up. If I answered he'd try to get me to tell Samantha to do something, although I had no such authority. He'd say to tell her that he missed her terribly, that she had to come right over. I'd say that I'd tell her he called. He'd tell me to tell her that he was lonely, that he'd rented some videos, and it was O.K. to bring Kurt. I'd repeat myself. I'd tell her that he called, that was all. Finally he'd tell me that he was feeling suicidal. If Samantha didn't come he'd kill himself. I didn't believe him, but I had to tell him that any more talk like that and I'd call the police to take him in for an "assessment." That shut him up for the rest of the evening.

I met him at the company picnic. It happened every September in a large park where the neighbors let their dogs run off leash. The manager didn't go. Adam went but he wasn't very enthusiastic. He said the staff tried to make it a field day, with races and prizes. The tenants were happy to get a hamburger and a few cigarettes. Especially the cigarettes.

Edward wasn't ugly. He was middle-aged, with blonde hair and a florid complexion. He wore shiny black patent leather shoes. I remember him sitting alone at a picnic table.

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

Samantha came over and talked to him for a minute. Then she approached Adam, who was holding a Frisbee. She suddenly backed him into another table and gave him a great hug. Adam patted her on the back with the Frisbee. He looked foolish. Samantha said she wouldn't be home that evening, she was staying at her Edward's. Adam didn't bother to tell her to go back and get her meds.

*

Samantha couldn't sleep. Her "PRN" wasn't working. She wanted a dollar so she could get a coffee at McDonald's. If she could just sit somewhere for a while she'd be all right. Otherwise she'd go to St. Onan's. I gave her the dollar. It was worth a try, but after she left I got out her file. She stayed at McDonald's till about 9:30. She must have had a free refill. I saw her climbing the dark-varnished stairs, urging "Adam" to come on. Then she was at the office door. She said I'd better call the police right away. She was going to kill someone. She had an axe.

I'd spent an hour that day tidying up her room. She had a lot of laundry and the usual litter. The most dangerous things were the hangers. I let her into the office. She sat in Adam's chair beside the computer while I dialed the number. I handed her the phone and listened in the worn office chair while she told the operator that she was psychotic, that she had a lethal weapon, that she was a danger to herself and

Jon Thomas Rowland

others. When she was finished I asked her to hand the receiver back to me. I told the operator that I was the support worker at Emile Durkheim House, a residential treatment facility for people with mental illness. The woman she'd just spoken to was delusional. There was no weapon. There was no danger. She'd suspected as much. Samantha's language was formulaic. She'd been around too many workers.

*

The snow crunched under my five-dollar Goodwill shoes. The cobbled front yard of the House was littered with the debris of pin-money envelopes and cigarette packs, butts and ashes, pop cans, etc. It spilled into the next yard. There were yellow bags of sidewalk salt beside the railing on the porch, but I nearly slipped on the icy burlap runner. Laura hadn't salted it yet.

During shift change in the office Babs had neatly arranged everything in front of her on the little round table. The stapler, the staple remover, and the paper-clip container were lined up beside the ruler. A yellow pad was in front of her. She'd written a few notes about what had happened from midnight till 8 A.M. There was a bulb on the third floor landing that needed changing. Ellie needed pin money; otherwise, she couldn't get her morning pop. Babs must have been bored at 3 A.M. She'd peeked into the pin money

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House
envelopes.

*

I showed the manager Mack's dosette. His team had just dropped it off. It didn't look right to me. It didn't even feel right. The manager just glanced at it. She said it was fine. She was busy. She was counting the cigarette money at the little round table.

If I'd bothered to think about it I'd have noticed that Mack's team had forgotten his clozapine. I was busy too. I was making dinner. It wasn't for me to question the manager. It was just our bad luck that Adam was away that week. Otherwise I'm sure he'd have noticed.

Mack got no clozapine till his team returned the next week. The front door-bell rang. I ran up the coffee-stained stairs from the kitchen. Ellie was already at the door, answering like a porter. Oh here's staff, she said. He'll help you. The team member just glared at Ellie, handed me Mack's new dosette, and was gone.

A lot of team members disliked mentally ill people. Once a team leader (no less) phoned me because she didn't want team members to enter the House if anyone was delusional. She was concerned for their safety. Maybe they could phone ahead, and we could notify them if anyone was delusional. I

Jon Thomas Rowland

was new at the job, or I'd have told her that she and her team were in the wrong field. She was delusional herself. Instead I said as mildly as I could that while I appreciated her concern, I really didn't think it was practical to notify her in advance every time somebody in Emile Durkheim House was delusional. That meant we'd be calling her daily. Several times daily. Better to have us call when everyone was "normal." Better yet to assume that, on any given day, someone would be delusional -- and stay away.

I showed the dosette to Adam, who was back at his post and working, in the kitchen. I showed him the old dosette, which wasn't quite empty. He said, "No clozapine." I showed him the new dosette. It was the same.

Adam said he'd have to phone the hospital. Mack had been off his clozapine for a week. If they put him back on it where he'd been when he stopped, he might go into a coma. If they didn't put him back at all he'd "escalate." His medication would have to be gradually increased starting from a much smaller dosage than he'd been on before the interruption.

That night Mack sat ensconced in the third-floor smoking lounge. He wore dark glasses, and his face looked pale and metallic. He sat there all night, smoking and talking, sometimes with Frederick (not Fred) or Gabriel, but usually alone. He talked to me for a little while, when I brought him his evening meds, now with a tiny clozapine pill. Too small

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

to cause a heart attack, not big enough to stop his delusions. He said he knew. His voices had warned him about us. He was a good person. He'd wanted to believe that we were good people too, but he was wrong. The voices were right. We'd hurt him too much. He was leaving us. He was escalating. He was high. I'd never seen him look better. I'd never seen him stronger. I'd never seen him so happy.

*

Karl was angry with Gladys because she was a woman. Wanda was a woman. He'd trash everything in his room and kick in the office door if anyone interfered with Wanda, but that didn't stop him from hating Gladys. Gladys threw the meds at him, he said. Women were like that. He wanted his meds now. I told him he had to wait for Gladys. I didn't add that if I gave him his meds early Gladys would get confused and probably double-dose him, but that was the reason. He lost his temper completely, screamed at me that he wanted "the boss," and punched the wall. "I hate this place," he said. Join the club, I thought. "I hate you too," he said, meaning Adam. "And your fag friend." Meaning me (of course).

I wrote a shift entry about him that time. I noticed that the entry immediately above it, a quarterly entry, said that Karl was doing much better, interacting equally well with other tenants and staff.

*

Adam told me a joke. He asked me what you called a female brain surgeon. I knew it was a joke so I said "an exceptional person." No, he said. Fucking bitch. I wondered what he called me when he was with Gladys. He made a point of calling cigarettes "fags" when the three of us were together. After shift-change he'd say, "I think I'll have a fag." "You can have me," I'd say. Gladys always looked uneasy.

Once before shift-change they were discussing Karl. Gladys wondered how his girlfriend ever got him to shut up. Adam said Wanda probably sat on his face. Gladys laughed and was evidently about to tell some joke about tongues and other organs up ass-holes when she turned to me and asked me if I was gay. I said yes, thinking that there'd be no point in staying in the closet where someone like Gladys was concerned. I'd just have to put up with all kinds of homophobic remarks. It didn't matter that she was a fat ugly dike. Don't let anybody call her "girl" though.

Standing on the porch with Adam, during yet another cigarette break, he said women and gays had an advantage. I think he figured that if Gladys hadn't been a woman she'd have been fired years ago. As for himself, he was tall, blond, straight. Master race material.

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

I told him that it was hard to talk to someone knowing that what he was really thinking was, "Get away from me, fucking faggot." Adam said it was hard to know what people really thought, but they probably didn't think that. I said I hoped so. As for himself, I thought he was rather more complicated than he let on. Look at the effect of his accident, for one thing. He had a disability. He'd worked with schizophrenics all his life. That made him almost an eccentric. An eccentric loser, he said.

*

During my first fall at the House I worked with Adam when the manager was on vacation. Adam's wife was away on some kind of training course. Some mornings he was mysteriously late. He'd apologize for leaving me on my own and say he'd been out walking. He didn't seem like the type to contemplate nature, alone at 8 o'clock in Ossington. He had something on his mind. I wonder if he was already contemplating it. Perhaps he was only thinking of quitting. At the very least he had had to deliberate whether or not to come to work in the morning. It had required conscious decision, and resolve.

*

Adam and I were working in the kitchen with Michael.

Jon Thomas Rowland

Michael was our best peeler. In an hour he could peel enough potatoes for twenty tenants. His narrow focus intensified the effort.

Our job was to start him and to keep him going. That could be a chore. First I had to find him to ask him if he'd do it. He never said no. What little pin money he got on Tuesday would be spent by Thursday if not before. It would be no more than the half-smoked cigarettes in the can on the porch, that Ellie relished. It would be in the half full cans of Coke that Adam balled her out for leaving on the steps, if Gabriel didn't find them first.

He'd usually be in his room, knitting while listening to his T.V. The picture didn't work. Babs had taught him and Jack and some of the other male tenants how to knit interminable swathes of wool. They'd never even be scarves. None of the female tenants was interested, but Michael and Jack liked the image of themselves knitting. Knitting was quiet and small, the way they thought of themselves. I think Babs enjoyed seeing men knit. It was Hercules spinning, or Monsieur Lefarge.

Michael used to enter the kitchen and freeze. He'd stand perfectly still with his empty knapsack dangling from his shoulder. He'd snap out of it when I reminded him to wash. He'd do it energetically at the sink under Babs's towel dispenser. Then he'd freeze-frame again till I handed him one of the stainless-steel bowls. He would take it into the

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

dining area. I'd follow with one and a half bags of potatoes, the peeler, a knife for halving the larger spuds, and a cutting board. Then he'd start.

*

Adam joked that he used to be an actor, a porn star. He was "Buck Naked." The sweat was dripping off him. I bet he wished he was naked right then. He didn't want to drip in the mashed potatoes. I said I'd just get off on it. He said he was thinking of the tenants. I said they'd get off on it too.

He wiped his forehead with one of the brown paper towels from the dispenser. He folded the paper towel and stuck it to his forehead with the sweat of his brow. He wore it like a visor. A volunteer said he looked "so sexy" like that.

*

The manager started to use paper towels for napkins after she "restructured" the housekeeper. They were hard on the skin, but cheaper than the white napkins the cook bought. The dispenser was the one that, unable to think of anything useful to do one midnight shift, Babs had nailed to one of the cupboard doors. She probably thought that if a man could do it, she could do it better. It stuck out so far you couldn't use the counter beneath it. When you opened the

Jon Thomas Rowland

cupboard it was attached to, you risked hitting yourself in the head. You couldn't open it more than half way. You couldn't open the next cupboard more than halfway either, without running into it.

Without adding anything to the convenience and efficiency of our kitchen she'd removed a quarter of our cupboard space and a third of our counter-top. It was a triumph of bad thinking and worse construction. Our regular maintenance man couldn't have done it worse. Babs was so proud of herself she expected praise during shift change. We'd none to offer.

Babs also made changes to the office. Most of the female workers were short and fat. One of the workers from the hospital used to visit us every Friday with the "meds" for half a dozen tenants. One afternoon he sat down on one of our crummy black office chairs. He leaned back and nearly went horizontal. He laughed as he sat up and tightened the chair. Must be female staff around here, he said. Female staff being optimistic, I said.

Babs complained she couldn't reach the videos that were stored in the tall bookshelves to the right of our fake fireplace. So she wrecked the fireplace too, by bolting a cheap bookshelf to the right end of the mantle. It wasn't as high as the original shelf, and the tapes were out of the way ("where they belonged").

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

It wasn't even symmetrical. Babs had characteristically desecrated the only piece of real wood in the House. The mantle was solid mahogany. Above it hung a large expensive mirror, the only open thing in the office. Now it was obscured by Babs's arborite monstrosity.

When Babs relieved Gladys (at exactly one minute to midnight), Gladys was sincerely angry. She demanded to know what Babs thought she was doing. She didn't accept that anything a man could do a woman could do better. Not when the woman was Babs. Didn't we have a maintenance *man*? Now she'd screwed up the whole office. Didn't she know there were other people who used the office besides herself? Why didn't she ask first? How was Gladys going to fix her hair, when she couldn't even see her reflection? Babs really screwed up.

Babs said she was only trying to help out by doing a little maintenance at night. Every one else thought it was nice. That was a bald lie. Babs hadn't canvassed anyone yet. It wasn't like her to care what anyone thought. She'd pretend to, after it didn't matter.

Adam and I would have told her. She'd characteristically butchered the mantle for nothing, to put a few tapes that hardly anyone ever watched--where they "belonged." It was the same compulsion all over again. She'd done it to prove female superiority. Hers at least. Adam was concerned about wasting time. Babs could have been doing something

Jon Thomas Rowland

useful for the House. She could have cleaned the floor, or cooked a roast. She never did. She needed guidance. There wasn't any. She needed to be told, but she never was.

*

Adam phoned me very early one morning. I was doing the midnight to 8 A.M. shift. Babs had called in sick after another argument with Gladys over whose turn it was to mop the floor. Women's work, which none of ours wanted to do. Adam said he wouldn't be coming to work today. It was 4 A.M. and he hadn't been able to sleep because of the pain in his knees. He was lying on the sofa in the basement of the town house he'd gone into debt for. He'd put pillows under his knees and propped up his legs. The painkillers weren't helping. He'd just taken another sleeping pill. I think that was why he was less reserved than usual. I asked him if he often had trouble sleeping. He said every night. I said I was sorry. I asked how long he'd been having such trouble. He said ten years. I asked if there were anything that could be done about it. He said no. He'd have it for the rest of his life. He had to live with it. We didn't know that it wasn't for much longer. I said I was sorry. He said he was sorry I had to work his shift on top of my own. He told me not to get burnt out. He was breathing heavily. I thought maybe the drugs were beginning to take effect. He said there was work to do. I couldn't understand why he was breathing so heavily. Then, with a sob in his voice, he said, "We need

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

your help." I'm still not sure what he meant, but he was a joker. I said he'd be "missed." I hope that, in the context of a one-day absence, he didn't mistake my meaning.

*

Once we were called keepers, and they were called patients or lunatics. It's a tradition. It changes, and it stays the same. I've seen pictures of the male attendants at Thing Street asylum circa 1910. "Male" is tautological in historical context.

They were standing in an airing court, dressed for sport. I think it was cricket. They weren't at all bad looking. In white T-shirts that showed off their broad shoulders, they were handsome. I suppose before there were a lot of drugs keepers had to be fit. They were all tall. There were no doubt a lot of Englishmen among them, like Adam. I can't forbear adding "of course."

Adam's parents brought him to Canada when he was still a toddler. They came by boat. They would have been among the last immigrants to experience the archetypal arrival into the Gulf of St. Lawrence out of the open sea. It was like being ingested. They were working class. Adam's precursors not infrequently had affairs with their female clients, call them what you will. Maybe the keepers became clients. They socialized at the periodic asylum balls.

Jon Thomas Rowland

Sometimes they became fathers.

If you put us in T-shirts and photographed us holding cricket bats in a park, we'd look just like them. We'd look like keepers dressed for cricket circa 1910, in an old photograph hanging in the corridor of the administration building. There'd be a few more women. That's all.

I once read pages and pages of stuff in the provincial archives. There were letters in patients' files beginning "Dear Reader." There were notes and reports like our own shift entries and incident reports. There were notes from social workers complaining that they'd given patients tickets to the "Ex," but the patients had sold the tickets and used the money to see a show.

I loved to read such stuff. There between two sheets of yellow foolscap would be a spare ticket to the "Ex" eighty years ago.

I wanted our own entries and reports to be preserved. I liked to think of someone like me reading what I wrote. Like me, but not me. Adam said it wouldn't happen. It was the ministry's new policy. After seven years they'd all be burnt. Now that Adam himself has been cremated, I find it unacceptable.

I think it's typically cruel of the authorities to tell us in advance that nothing is to be saved. They do it in the name

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

of confidentiality. In reality they're sicker than any of our clients. The issue is secrecy. They want us to feel good about them for what they do, by consigning their secrets to the flames along with those we confide in. Their secrets don't really matter, except they get in the way of our feeling good about them, and their feeling good about themselves. That won't happen. Why wait seven years? Burn us now.

*

Yesterday evening the smoke alarm went off every three minutes in the House. Gladys was cooking a roast. She usually started it late because she spent so much time gossiping with her girlfriends on the telephone. Woe to the tenant who bothered her for a late supper or sullied an extra dish.

She cooked the roast her way. Because she started late she had to catch up by putting it in on high around eight o'clock after she'd soured it with a whole bottle of Bovril. Between eight and eleven-thirty the smoke alarm rang continually, detecting the burning roast. The wench didn't care. She wouldn't look at it again till it was "done" (burnt) at eleven P.M. Whether it was really done or not inside was irrelevant. She was done with it, anyway. At eleven-thirty she washed whatever dishes she'd been unable to avoid using and composed her turban for the night woman, Babs, whom she hated.

I felt like going into the House and moistening the roast. The meat was dry.

*

We went to the Canadian National Exhibition. In my neighborhood support workers, “keepers” if you like, have been taking clients to the “Ex” for decades. We were sitting at one of a row of picnic tables set up on the concrete floor of the “Food Pavilion.” We were escorting Frederick (not Fred), Gabriel, Karl, Leon, and Charlene. Charlene didn’t usually accompany us on our outings. She was more interested in music and bars. I think she came for the free food. We weren’t cool, or at least I wasn’t. Adam considered himself pretty hep.

Charlene was definitely cool. I watched her stocky body as she approached our table through a small crowd, carrying a tray of fries. Even in the heat she wore a man’s white leather vest. It clashed with her baggy shorts. She wanted it to. She always wore sun-glasses. Today her usually long dark hair was braided.

Adam sat diagonally across from me. I remember the way his Ray Bans hung from the collar of his shirt. It was a red and white checked short-sleeved sports shirt. He’d undone the first two buttons. Of course it was late summer (the

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

opening of the "Ex" signaled the end of summer), and it was hot. For a change he wasn't wearing anything under his sports shirt.

Frederick (not Fred) reached for Adam's glasses where they hung in the crotch of his collar. He covered himself with his large hand. Frederick was quite capable of grabbing his crotch. Just for fun. I'd seen him do it in the kitchen. Adam blushed. Frederick laughed. He asked him why his chest was freckled. To me it didn't appear to be freckled, but covered with red blotches. It was smooth, at least what I could see of it in the V of his collar. He told us to never mind. Frederick (not Fred) couldn't or wouldn't get it off his mind, however. He was sex-obsessed. He asked Adam why he wasn't hairier. He said he didn't know. He'd always wanted a hairy back. Frederick peered under the table at our legs. He said our hairy legs looked sexy in shorts. Gabriel laughed. By then Charlene had joined us. Between mouthfuls of fries she told Frederick (not Fred) to stop embarrassing us. What about his own legs? He always wore jeans.

It was on the way back from our first trip to the "Ex," when Adam first told me about his chronic pain. Babs had gone with us early in the morning, right after working a shift. Naturally she was tired and left early. Adam was tired too, and limped slightly on the way back from the lakefront. Gabriel and Frederick (not Fred) were dawdling somewhere behind us. Karl was forging ahead. I'd bank-rolled the

Jon Thomas Rowland

expedition, because Adam hated to advance the money. He said he always had a lot of trouble getting it back from our skin-flint manager. Parsimonious Pat. He probably didn't even have any.

I'd given everyone ten dollars spending money. None of them had spent any of it however. Their money went farther at McDonald's. Adam and I had spent most of our allowances playing the rigged games of chance. Then everyone had boarded the polar express. It whipped around very fast, but never got off the ground. I remember the sight of Frederick (not Fred) and Karl, their mouths wide open, eyes wide open too, clenching the bar in front of them as their long hair lashed their faces and the train took off.

I asked Adam what made him so tired. He said the pain in his knees kept him awake. I could sense him gauging whether or not to be open and deciding he would be. I think it had do with the spirit of the outing. It was palpable to me, and probably to him too. It was something families did. The last time I'd gone was forty years ago, when I was no older than Adam when he came here. I even arrived by water, or at least we crossed over the water on the little bridge at the entrance to the grounds. My family had been together then. At least we did things together, as a family. My father was with us. I hadn't been there since that day forty years ago, but things seemed familiar: the layout of the grounds, the stuffed animals, the proximity of the lake. I had returned as a member of a family. I was with Adam.

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

I told him some of this. He said it must bring back a lot of memories. It will bring back even more now that he's become a memory too. He's joined my permanently dysfunctional family. His pictures will go into one of those albums Barrie said I'd never sell.

*

Adam and Gladys used to cruise the women passing by in front of the house. They would park their cars in the little front yard that had been paved with cobblestones so our maintenance man wouldn't have to cut the grass. Gladys had a sports car that she never let the tenants ride in. She was afraid of contagion. Adam's little car was virtually our taxi. Needless to say, the company was too cheap to provide us with a car. Gladys and Adam would stand and smoke beside their respective vehicles. They kept a leisured gaze on the sidewalk for the right woman. She'd have had to be bisexual.

I knew when she passed. Gladys smiled with her teeth. Adam reacted rather like a pointer dog, following her progress with his head. Sometimes he followed her with his whole body. He'd say, take me home with you. If I was sitting on the steps next door, and I usually was, he'd wonder aloud how Norm could just sit there. It was obvious.

There was something very human about it all. A man and a

Jon Thomas Rowland

woman, one gay and one straight, smoking in shorts and T shirts, the hot sunlight gleaming on the cars, the humid air scented with tobacco, gasoline, wax and Gladys's heavy "Breeze of Lesbos" perfume. I liked them. Adam said Gladys and Babs were both great people. They just needed help. At other times he referred to them as cunt and clown. I preferred Adam.

*

I thought Adam bonded too much with Gladys. He always acted differently around her. Maybe he couldn't accept that Gladys was a dyke, or maybe he felt he had to prove he wasn't a fag. Not that he didn't cruise at other times. He just did it more vigorously with her. As someone said of Lady Macbeth, I thought "the lady" protested too much.

I thought at other times he really hated Gladys, or at least despised her. The sexist jokes were the lowest expression of his disregard. He referred to Gladys as a "diesel dyke," a "pussy bumper." That was before they knew that I was gay, but that wouldn't have made any difference. Adam despised Gladys for her delusional business schemes, her meanness, her hypocrisy, her incompetence at work, her unhappiness at home -- only a partial list.

I would have felt sorry for Gladys but she didn't have any consideration for me at all. She once asked me all of a

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

sudden if I was "into leather." She assumed all gays were. I think her knowledge of contemporary mores came straight from "The Jerry Springer Show." She watched it regularly on the dining room T.V. It was one venue where she was sure to see worse losers than herself.

She would still have sacrificed me to save herself. I learned that one evening when Betty met me on the street and accused me of not giving her a pill from her evening meds. I knew that I'd only given her the dinner-time meds. I had shown her the dosette the way I always did. The dinner-time slot was empty. The evening meds were in the slot beneath it. I never left pills behind, because I always checked.

I went into the House to speak to Gladys. She was in the kitchen, preparing something for herself. I told her what Betty had told me. I asked if I could borrow her keys so I could see myself. I went up the narrow coffee-stained stairs and let myself into the office. The dosette was on the little round table. It was as Betty said. The evening meds were gone except for one tiny pill. I think it was clozapine. I returned Gladys's keys. She told me to remember to sign for Betty's evening meds. I told her I hadn't given her the evening meds. Moreover, I told her what I was sure had happened. She'd given them to her herself and, as usual, not signed for them. She'd also left a pill behind. It was her signature.

Gladys became defensive. She invoked her twenty years

Jon Thomas Rowland

experience vs. my half as many months. The next shift-change with Adam she was still talking about it. She went on and on about that pill. How could it have been there? I thought the reason was obvious. She felt she was always the one suspected. The reason for that was also obvious. She made too many mistakes. The manager had already warned me to say nothing. Adam humored her, told her nobody was pointing a finger at her. He kept smoking on the porch.

Later I asked him why he didn't speak up. I called him two-faced, wishy-washy. He smiled. He said there was no point being honest with Gladys.

*

During shift change with Adam and Gladys the latter complained about Charlene. Gladys didn't think she was cured. She meant her lice problem. She'd seen her scratching her head yesterday evening when she came for her "meds." I wondered if Gladys got close enough to look in her mouth. Probably not that time. While on the topic of skin infection, Gladys nonchalantly mentioned that last week Karl's girlfriend, Wanda, had told her about bed-bugs in her apartment. Adam turned around. Wanda came to see Karl once or twice a week. It was nearly a week since her last visit. Gladys had waited nearly a week to tell us. Adam said nothing then. Why be honest to Gladys? Later in the dining room he called her a "stupid cunt." If Karl brought bedbugs

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House
into the House, we'd have to have it fumigated.

We'd also have to find alternative housing for twenty schizophrenic tenants. As staff we'd probably be quarantined. It would be a mess. If Gladys had told us earlier, or said something to Wanda at the time, we could have arranged for her to meet Karl outside the House. We could also have arranged for Karl to stay home over the weekend. That required much tact, given how violent he became at any interference with his weekly visits with Wanda. Because of Gladys's stupidity there'd probably be a scene.

Philip walked in on the next shift change. I'd just told Gladys that, because of the danger of infestation, we'd have to keep Karl home over the weekend. Gladys tried to look appalled. She accused us of violating the tenant's rights. Philip agreed. We had no right. I doubted that either of them gave a fuck about tenants' rights. Philip didn't even want to serve them coffee. She said it made them restless. They were up to something. However, I explained to Gladys as patiently as I could that after shift change I would try to contact Wanda, to get her to talk to Karl.

Gladys demanded why nothing had been done earlier. Why the hell weren't we more "pro-active?" She always was a great one for shibboleths. Previously her favorites had been "behavior modification" and "shadowing." When Jack threatened to burn us down by smoking in his room, he

Jon Thomas Rowland

needed "behavior modification," which would be achieved by "shadowing." If Gladys would only have checked his room once or twice a night, we might not have had to evict him. She was too lazy (and it would have violated Jack's "rights").

I told Gladys that she should have been more "pro-active" herself. She shouldn't have waited a week to tell us about Karl's infestation. She accused me of getting too "worked up." I heard her tell Philip in an aside that I was "escalating." He nodded rapidly, probably signifying that they'd analyze me later. He'd obviously teamed up with Gladys, to get her shifts. She called in sick a lot. There was no doubt whom she'd ask to "relieve" her. Why be honest with Gladys?

*

I waited on my porch. Karl waited on his. We were waiting for Wanda. I heard Karl's shout. He'd noticed her first, but I waved her over before he got to her. I told her about our concern. She said she'd found little heaps of dead bugs around her bed. She'd already been bitten a few times on her legs. She agreed that Karl should probably stay with us until the infestation was over.

Karl had joined us by then. He objected that he wanted to stay with Wanda. I told him that we'd make a deal with him. He loved deals if they involved money. He was the House

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

capitalist. He bought more cigarettes than he could possibly smoke. We assumed he sold them at profit to tenants from other houses whom he met at his job. I know he sold some to Joan.

He asked what kind of deal. I told him we'd give him money for staying home. He asked how much. I considered that he'd be giving up some of his personal freedom for the common good. I also considered that he'd need some spending money, if he and Wanda were to be together outside the House. I said twenty dollars. He said "Deal!"

*

Adam, Gladys and I discussed sex while setting up supper one evening shortly before Christmas. We discussed masturbation. They had been joking about it. Being queer and an outsider so far as heterosexual arrangements were concerned, I said it came as a surprise to me that straight married men masturbated. Evidently they didn't have passionate sex every night, or if they did they had it with themselves. Both of them laughed. Adam explained that for the first six months there was plenty of sex, but it didn't make the Top Ten List of Reasons for Staying Married. Even I could appreciate that it was mainly a legal arrangement. Balzac would have laughed.

Adam got my allusions to old John Waters movies. Later that day I inadvertently "came out" to Gladys, I passed by the House on my way to the store. Adam and Gladys were smoking on the porch. That day the water had been cut off so we'd been refilling the toilet tanks with expensive bottled water to keep the waste moving. They'd just surprised Mack squatting on the toilet, burying it under his mountainous buttocks. I said it must have been like walking in on Divine. Adam said in a John Waters movie we'd fill the tanks by pissing in them. Gladys asked what kind of movie was that. Adam said she obviously wasn't as hep as she thought. To me privately he called her a "dumb bitch."

Then there were the jokes. The real stinkers. He was going to put a spot in the middle of his forehead and hang a potato from his crotch and become a dick-'tater. Adam didn't have many clothes and some of his favorite clothing, like his "Leafs" shirt, got ruined with bleach. We traded shirts. He gave me a black sports shirt. I noticed right away how nice it smelled. He said he washed it in Tide. He asked me if I knew why. He said (with a lisp) "because it was cold out tide."

One night a few weeks before Christmas we were standing on the porch after supper and he said he couldn't drive his wife's car over the curb without damaging the bumper. He said he couldn't get it up, and winked at me. But it was

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

worth a try, he said as he handed me the cell-phone. Hold this anyway, he added. As opposed to his cock, I thought he meant.

*

Sometimes Adam was just a jerk. He'd take the cigs I was always buying him and stuffing in his "Roots" bag and hand them out to everybody like he thought he was J.P. Fucking Morgan. But he wouldn't give me a good handshake. Not after I said I was gay.

I remember just before Christmas vacation, his last. We were standing together on the front porch before he left for the holidays. He was very unhappy. He didn't like Christmas because it was so "commercial," or maybe he never got cha-cha heals. He was broke - I knew, because I was buying him his cigarettes, and he was desperate enough to let me. He said he really appreciated it, every time he went over to his "Roots" bag and looked in and, lo, there was another carton - but he felt so bad, because he'd never be able to pay me back. I see why, now.

The manager had already said good-bye. She had taken Adam's hand, then mine, and gone to her crummy apartment building around the corner. She didn't care one way or another about Christmas. Adam suddenly offered me his hand to shake. He hadn't done that since the first time I

Jon Thomas Rowland

bought him a carton. I'd been sitting on the front steps waiting for him to come to work in his little car. I'd called him over. He wanted to know why I was doing that. I said because I thought he had to have something for himself. I'd noticed that he hadn't even bought a chocolate bar in weeks.

This time I must have held his hand a bit too long, because he withdrew it violently. Then he proceeded to put himself down, like he didn't want me to be attracted to him, and maybe at the same time was enjoying the attraction, and indulging himself a little. He said he was just a loser, a middle-aged loser getting a gut, and he was straight.

That Christmas I got depressed and nearly quit. Everyone thought it was Christmas, but it was Adam. He could do that to me.

*

He could be mean. I tried hard one week to get some of the dirtiest tenants to take a shower. The men posed special problems. Apart from the fact that they were especially dirty, they could be unpredictably immodest. I'd usually try to get Gabriel into the shower right after giving him his meds in the morning. It was a shock tactic. He'd initially refuse. There'd be saliva on his pillow and his shirt. Drool, Caspar called it. Gabriel stank of urine, saliva, and cigarettes. He slept in his clothes, sometimes several nights in a row.

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

Once I got him to plant his feet on the floor beside the bed I'd nearly won. If I relented he still might go back to bed. Many mornings I'd got him medicated, out of bed, dressed and cigaretted to go to the asylum for bloodwork. He'd take the cigarette I offered him at the office door, promising to go as soon as he'd smoked it in the first floor lounge. I wouldn't see him leave, but hours later I'd assume he must have gone and come back. I'd look for him to give him his afternoon meds and find him sound asleep in bed, still clenching his bus fare in a sweaty fist.

After he put his feet on the floor I'd find him a towel, a bathrobe, and (if I were lucky) some clean clothes. Usually everything was dirty. His socks would be crumpled up like balls of paper. The dirtiest pairs were crusty and hard like salt-damaged shoe-leather. His underwear had piss and shit stains on it. His closet was so jammed full of clothing that you had to tug and yank at anything to remove it. Most of the clothing was dirty. What wasn't dirty was unsuitable. Gabriel had either grown too fat for it or it was designed for some purpose or occasion that never arose in the House. I'd usually find an old pair of jeans under bags of laundry at the bottom of his closet. Something would be wrong with them. They'd have a bib or be too tight. They'd be for a woman. I'd tell him I was going downstairs but would be back in five minutes to make sure he was in the shower.

Jon Thomas Rowland

I'd put Gabriel's towel, his soap, and a little Dixie cup with his shampoo in it (the same kind we used for "meds") in the bathroom. I'd hang the towel from the rack where he'd find it when he was done. I'd put the soap on the ledge that circled the tub. Then I'd get away as fast as I could, because he might come in while I was there and start to strip. He had no modesty. Few of the tenants did. They'd spent their lives in institutions where their modesty had been stripped away. After midnight I often glimpsed naked bodies flashing down the hall on the way to the toilet. That made trouble if the naked body was male and surprised a female tenant coming out of the lounge. Betty would scream, march to the office, and demand to come in and rave about it for half an hour, or she'd go to the second floor pay-phone and call the cops. I think by then the cops had that phone flagged. Babs wanted to tear it off the wall, but the manager wouldn't hear of it. It was a cheap placebo. Most tenants felt better after calling the cops. Frederick (not Fred) once called them on Laura, claimed that she had a gun and was threatening to blow his head off, then went straight to bed and slept like a baby. I tried to get him to come downstairs to talk to the officers, but he refused to see them. They wanted to tell him how much they liked to drive fast with the siren screaming and the lights flashing. I hadn't heard any siren. The phone was flagged. They didn't take any calls dialed from it at face value.

They were always calling the cops on one another or ourselves. Adam warned me to be cautious in my zeal to get

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

them clean. It hadn't happened yet at the House, but it had certainly happened before. All of them were schizophrenic, most "paranoid subtype." Ideally I should always have had someone with me as a witness.

Gabriel would still be in the shower when I got back, or the tub. Then I'd somehow have to make sure he really washed. Strictly speaking it wasn't possible without being where I wasn't supposed to be. I'd listen for the sound of soap on skin and encourage him verbally through the door.

With Betty I used a different technique. I didn't dare risk a full-scale direct assault. It probably wouldn't have worked with her anyway, and if it failed I wouldn't ever have recovered my authority. Adam had warned me from the beginning, as in the matter of locking the T.V. sets, not to overplay my hand.

We'd had only one real battle. She'd lost her temper in the dining room, because I'd made her wait for everyone else to be served before she got "seconds." She grabbed the milk pitcher that I'd been pouring from at the pass-through, which for hygienic reasons was against the rules. She poured herself a tall glass of milk, and threw the pitcher back at me so violently that it bounced off the island and splashed onto the floor. Of course, I ordered her to clean it up. She refused, but I felt I couldn't back down this time. I pursued her all over the House, pointing in the direction of the kitchen. Clean it up, I insisted. She said she was going to get

Jon Thomas Rowland

a cop. I said go ahead, after you clean it up. Finally I told her that if she didn't clean it up I'd refuse to sell her any more contraband cigarettes out of the office. You can't do that, she shrieked. I told her that I certainly could. In fact I was going to write an entry in the common log telling everyone that she was cut off cigarettes from now on. Go away, she screamed. Just go away. All right, I said. No more cigarettes ever. I waited a few moments in the office, till I heard her familiar march. All right, she said. I'm ready to do it. Just a moment I said, when I'm ready. In the dining room she was very dramatic. I hadn't played seen such a Sarah Bernhardt performance since Frederick's great prat fall a few weeks ago. I handed her a dish clout, pointing at the mess on the floor. Do you want me to get down on my hands and knees like a dog, she demanded. I nodded.

I naturally decided to get Betty to bathe by offering her a few cigarettes. It worked beautifully. If I'd used any other means, there'd have been screaming, histrionics and hysteria. I didn't even have time for it all.

Adam could be mean because after I'd spent my morning doing these things, he'd arrive at 10 o'clock, hang up his "Roots" bag and put away his "Ray Ban" glasses, very methodically. He was studied in such methods. The point was to keep me waiting till he was ready, then find fault with my shift change. It wasn't hard because by then I'd already have spent two hours on Frederick (not Fred) and Gabriel's hygiene. I'd have gone up and down the dark-varnished

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

stairs at least six times dispensing "meds," carrying the plastic water pitcher, Dixie cups, and dosettes. I'd also have removed the breakfast things in the dining room, and put on the soup for lunch.

I'd tell him how I'd worked to get the tenants into the shower. He'd say that was great. He'd offer me one of his Lucky Strikes. We'd smoke on the porch. Then Betty would join us. The tenants had an uncanny instinct for knowing when and where we were on break. She'd inevitably say something about our deal. Adam would look at me. He'd thought I was motivating the tenants to take better care of themselves, but I was bribing them. I'd feel so chagrined. Later I'd notice him with Laura or someone else whom he'd just got into the shower, handing her a cigarette. He'd have arranged for me to notice.

He had his own technique. I think the manager had instructed him to discourage me. When she examined the logbook and read that I'd got half a dozen tenants cleaned up, it made her look bad. Apart from ordering supplies, socializing with the workers (all of whom she rightly considered useless inferior creatures) and, of course, counting the cigarette money, she didn't do very much. She didn't manage in any sense of that loaded word. But once I surprised her by coming in early, and saw where she'd been doing her personal banking business on the office computer. She'd typically forgotten to remove the page. Like most misers, she was loaded. I took away a lasting impression of

Jon Thomas Rowland

many accounts, with a lot of money in each. Those she managed.

*

Gladys's shift change was brief. She wrote a note in the common log. No major problems to report. Everyone had had "meds" except Julia and Ellie. Julia I was used to. She'd get her "meds" from me when she got home from some bar around 2 A.M. I'd write my own note in the common log. Julia returned at 2 A.M. Client was steady on her feet. Speech was clear. Thinking seemed coherent. Staff gave client meds as usual. That was for Babs's benefit. It broke the series of entries stating that Julia came home "obviously drunk."

Ellie's absence was different. She'd been unusually anxious for cigarettes. She'd been getting one every even hour. She came to the office on the odd hours too, hoping Gladys would forget and give her an extra one. At 10:30 Gladys had looked out the big bay office window and seen her negotiating with a cabbie. Last seen wearing tight jeans and a T-shirt. It was snowing, and Ellie was bare-foot.

Right after shift change Ellie's mother called. Her daughter had arrived and she was sending her straight back. I was working in the kitchen when I heard Ellie's footsteps overhead. At least she must have found some shoes. I

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

peeked into her bedroom. She'd pulled the blanket over her head. That jaunt cost her mother 300 dollars. "Brilliant," as Ellie liked to say.

*

Ellie was addicted to fluids. She'd wrap her lips around the bathroom tap and suck back the whole water-works if she could. Then she'd pull up her T-shirt and rub her smooth stomach, swollen like a balloon. She'd moan "O-o-o-oh, that feels g-o-o-o-d." The disability allowance folks exhausted their meager ingenuity trying to get her extra money for plastic mattress covers, to divert pin money to pee money. Somewhere they got some emergency funding.

I suspected all along that it came out of her cigarette money, because that was when they cut her back to one cigarette every even hour. It was too much for mere co-incidence. It was their bright idea. Everything came out of that little blue Tupperware dish on the mantle.

Ellie looked glum. She shivered on the porch in her blue housecoat. I asked her if she liked Christmas. Oh yes, she said, it was her favorite holiday. She wanted to hang all New York City on the tree. "Brilliant."

*

I have a scrap of yellow foolscap torn from the pad on the clipboard that Adam wanted Babs to leave in the kitchen.

Adam had to tape a sticky note to the board reminding Babs to "Please leave clipboard and pad in kitchen." He subsequently added "and pen." Otherwise, as we knew, after midnight Babs would put away the clipboard, the pad, and the pen in a drawer of the "meds" cabinet, or in a cubby hole of the desk, wherever she thought they "belonged," which by some perverted logic was always as far away as possible from where they were needed, at the furthest possible remove from the people that used and needed them. I wonder if she felt that way about people. Then to her Adam must be where he belongs.

Adam put notes on the stapler, the tape dispenser, the apron, the dustpan, the broom. He couldn't put a sticky note on the electric tea kettles, so he wrote an entry in the common log, telling Babs not to move them. They were a particular obsession. She wouldn't put them away. She couldn't. I believe she wanted to, but there was nowhere to put them. Instead she separated them. She left one where it was, beside the sink where it could easily be refilled. She left the other at the other end of the kitchen, inconveniently away from the taps. We would replace the kettle, and Babs would remove it again, night after night.

That might have been disturbing enough, or amusing,

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

depending on one's sense of humor. More disturbing were the obvious signs of bad temper. Babs removed things and put them away, night after night, in steadily mounting anger. The plate was loose over the outlet, as if it Babs had yanked the plug out of the socket too many times. The bottom of one of the kettles was cracked. Adam said Babs was probably furious. He imagined her cursing: "God-damned men (never put anything *where it belongs*)."

On the scrap of yellow paper attached to the clipboard, with the pen that dangled from it on a piece of string, Adam wrote "MERRY CHRISTMAS."

*

I asked the manager to cancel my shifts for January. By late January I was beginning to be anxious about not working. I devised an excuse to go next door. It wasn't difficult, since Patricia still owed me the cost of two cartons of cigarettes, one hundred dollars. That was the float that I withdrew every few weeks to replenish the cigarettes with. It was mine, although the manager took it home with him every night. She spent too much time counting it.

There was a new woman in the House. She was middle-aged, fat and Italian. Another one! She sprawled in one of the office chairs with a proprietary, officious air. Perhaps it was the clip-board in her lap. She had obviously been taking

Jon Thomas Rowland

notes, though there was nothing worth noting unless she too was writing a book. Adam introduced her as the volunteer in the kitchen program. The kitchen program was Frederick (not Fred) peeling potatoes or Betty wheeling them in from Adam's car.

I thought she was using the House as a dodge. It enabled her to satisfy the work requirements for the welfare that was supporting herself, her children and maybe even her husband. She had probably described it as a valuable training experience. She had also enrolled in a fake school called "Lincoln College." The government paid her tuition.

She was candid about her dodges, even indignant. She had been a Marxist back in Italy. Now she looked back with nostalgia on the days of Victor Emanuel. Even Mussolini. She said sometimes that was what you needed. A strong man in charge. She didn't understand why there was no Canadian patriotism. Once, imitating some French author I'd been reading, I blurted out that I thought Canada was a shit-house. She looked shocked. That was for Adam, who was present. I was only paraphrasing Celine.

I explained that I thought this country wasted its human resources. She agreed with me there. I knew she would. She had been some kind of doctor back in Rome. I thought of telling her that I was a doctor too. I had a PhD. in English from the University of Montage. I had a B.A. and an M.A. from our local University of Titz. I unplugged

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House
toilets for a living.

Eugenia hadn't come here to unplug toilets, although she was full of criticism of the decadent West. She spent a lot of time sipping tea watching coverage of the Iraq War on CNN. She was convinced that the Americans had finally gone too far. I'm sure she considered me decadent too. She was curious about my sexuality. She liked to contrast male and female anatomy. The male had to perform while the female could be passive. The female could also fake it. That made her superior. She told one of the other workers that back home they used to stone homosexuals. That is how they dealt with deviant orientations.

She asked me if I had children. I said no. She said it used to be every man's duty to his family to procreate. Otherwise everything stopped with him. I wondered if she thought we were expendable now that we weren't doing our duty. I thought of telling her that there were other kinds of continuity besides children. I wasn't even sure that children were one. It depended on the child. I didn't think I owed anything to my family. So far as I was concerned everything could stop. The world appeared to be stopping anyway, or maybe it was time for us to get off.

I didn't like Eugenia very much. The house already sheltered twenty egotists whom we were paid to serve. Nevertheless she sometimes behaved as if it revolved around herself. She would sit in the office and peruse the confidential client files.

Jon Thomas Rowland

She would remove papers we were working on in order to process her own voluminous documents. She commandeered the telephone and the dysfunctional fax machine. She tended to pop up wherever I was working. It was as if she thought I was up to something secret and she had to find out what it was. One afternoon I started to mop the kitchen floor and she chose that moment to make herself a coffee and stand sipping it in my way. I got angry at her and ordered her to leave the kitchen. She refused. She accused me of having a "complex" about her. We were always psychopathologizing one another.

I told her that I wasn't interested in her opinions. In the absence of other staff I was in charge. I had told her to leave the kitchen so she should go. She said no, she was a "kitchen volunteer." I told her a volunteer was supposed to help out. She could help out by doing what she was told by staff, and getting out of the way. She raised her voice and I raised mine. As in a duet. One of the tenants must have told Adam in the office. Staff were fighting! He came downstairs and told us that if he we didn't shut the fuck up he'd kick us both out of the kitchen. Eugenia was crying by then. She was very sensitive. She sobbed that she was a "refugee." "Refugee" was a notch above support worker.

*

Martha only spoke through an interpreter. Adam asked him

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

if her if she liked watching TV. She said the only thing she liked was masturbation. Her worker explained that she was into porn. She was getting kicked out of her flop because she sat on the toilet with the door open reading porn and plucking her pubic hairs. She said he was making a cunt.

Besides making cunts she liked to set fires. She was good at it, especially in boarding homes with cooking privileges.

Adam wondered which was getting her kicked out. Masturbation or incendiarism, or both.

*

I tapped on the heavy fireproof door. No answer. I had already inserted the master key in the lock. I hardly had to play with it at all before it turned and the door opened, revealing Joan seated on the bed in a greasy black leather jacket, stained trousers with a razor-sharp lady-killer crease, and pointed lady-killer shoes. She leisurely smoked a freshly lit hundred-millimeter cigarette, pendent from her whiskered lips.

I said, "No smoking." She sprang at me, shouting get out, she was going to kill me, if I didn't let her finish her cigarette.

I insisted: "No smoking." Joan extinguished the cigarette by grinding it under the pointed toe of her left lady-killer shoe.

Jon Thomas Rowland

She was still going to kill me. She retreated into the hallway, removing another cigarette from the breast pocket of the greasy black leather Jacket as I repeated, "No smoking." She'd get evicted if she didn't stop smoking.

The manager ordered me to write a report. Joan was getting evicted.

*

Betty brought Caspar her watch to repair. Caspar had no training in that line, but politely examined it anyway. A noisome stench emanated from the dial. The hands of time stank of mortality. Then he realized it was shit, caked on from Betty's own hands where she'd been scratching herself. He dropped it, disgusted. It bounced and whirled across the office floor like an insect in its death throes, flashed like a fish's scale in sunlight, winked like Fred Astaire tap-dancing in a storm-sewer.

Betty never wiped her fat ass with anything besides her hand. I'd already noticed the large brown stains on her linen. Shit.

She retrieved her watch and pressed it to her ear, grinning broadly. It ticked.

*

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

Betty wanted her fifteen minutes in the office. I wouldn't let her in. I'd already brought her her meds in her room. I let myself in with the master key. She was sleeping with the blanket pulled up over her head. It was cold in her room but she'd turned on her little electric fan. It was her soporific device. I pulled the blanket off the foot of her bed, exposing her feet and legs. She'd slept in her clothes again.

I went to the head of her bed. I said, "Betty, meds." I knew she was awake. She knew she'd been caught. "All right," she said. She lurched upright on the side of the bed. She was wearing track pants and a heavy sweater. We'd bought the sweater together at the Goodwill last week. She'd been so pleasant to everyone in the store. Now she was furious.

I looked at the dosette to check that it was hers. Then I looked at her to see that she was Betty. Then I showed her the dosette so she could see that it was hers. I pointed to the slot and asked if it was right. She nodded her head. "Yes." I tapped out the pills into her cupped hands then checked the dosette again to make sure there was nothing left. I showed her the dosette. Empty? "Yes." Finally I told her that because she'd slept in her clothes again last night she wasn't to get any time in the office. No more hairy-chested hunks in low-budget slasher movies. "All right," she said, covering her head again. "Who cares?" She cared.

She returned a few moments later wondering if she had any

Jon Thomas Rowland

mail. From her secret admirer? It was just an excuse to get into the office. Adam was in the washroom. I heard the fan going. I knew the routine. He'd move his bowels, then he'd brush his teeth. He said it made him feel comfortable for the long drive home. The fan went off. In a moment Adam was at the door, baggie in hand. Betty saw her chance and snuck in, trying to be seductive. She settled her bulk into one of the dirty armchairs reserved for tenants. She'd changed into a florid gown.

Adam sat down by the computer. Betty started to complain about her loneliness and the sisters who used to tease her on her way home from school. Now she figured they were Lesbians. She got onto the subject one afternoon after I caught her raving about "fucking dikes." I balled her out. I think she concocted the story as an excuse. Serge took it seriously. He called a meeting in the office as if it were the break-through he'd been looking for. The denouement in a Russian novel. Natasha Filipovna had been abused as a child! He thought he'd cracked Betty's case. Adam sighed. He'd never finished grade 10. Serge had a B.A. in psychology.

Betty said there was something in her head. People were picking on her. They stared at her dress. Then she said she wanted someone to repair the electric socket in her room. Looking at it gave her ideas. I said maybe she was thinking of frying herself. We'd have her for supper. Adam said she'd be rump roast.

*

The nicotine-stained walls of Jack's room were plastered with pictures of models torn from gossip magazines. Young men and women with glossy hair, clear complexions, and perfect smiling teeth. He was a predator, despite the idealized portrait of him by his mother that was tacked unframed to the wall. It showed him in his youth thirty years ago. Stringy brown hair and enormous glasses that made him resemble a parasite, Jean-Paul Sartre as a tape-worm. He was always a predator.

Most mornings when I went in to do room-check there was piss in a teacup on top of his dresser. When I quizzed him about it at first he'd deny it but he always confessed eventually. With an air of inexorable honesty. He just couldn't help himself. He was a good guy who did bad things. How can you tell the dancer from the dance?

He had a litany of stupid questions. A catechism. A whole inquisition. Why are people bad? Why do people steal? Why do people kill? Why do people hurt dogs? Why do dogs lift their leg when they pee? One groped for the answer. There were reasons, but one was hard-pressed to come up with any. Heredity?

I tried to forestall him by asking first. Why do people steal?

Jon Thomas Rowland

He immediately shot back, "Because they're naughty." Why do people hurt dogs? "Because they're sick." I wanted to ask him the next question. Why are people sick?

I thought of all his robberies. I thought of him taking off down Thing Street, puffing on one of the manager's cigarettes. That made me smile. All the wounded animals showing up in shelters across the city were another matter.

I tried to implicate him more directly. When he asked me why people were bad I asked him why he pissed in cups. He gave me a sidelong glance and slunk off clutching a warm glass of tea. Or was it urine?

We were really going to miss Jack, after his eviction.

*

I was in the dining room when I heard the shouting in the smoking lounge. When I entered Martha was holding the door open. Actually she was cowering behind it, using it like a shield. Against the slings and arrows of George Sand. How long was this to be her fortune, she demanded. Outrageous!

George Sand stood four feet high in the middle of the pop-sticky cig-stained linoleum smoking lounge floor. She was holding a glass of tap water in one hand. On the other he

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

bore a little flag with the insignia of Adam's team, the Maple Leafs. She wielded it like a riding crop and occasionally tapped it against the glass gleefully shouting what I now understood to be "Pay! Pay!"

You see! You see! Martha emerged from her shelter and frantically waved her enormous matronly arms. Death threatens! She could have thrown George Sand the length of the House.

I didn't see anything except Martha and George Sand and the usual crap of the smoking lounge. Heavy armchairs with black vinyl cushions you could wipe the vomit off of with a bleach-soaked rag. Sometimes you had to. Solid maple end tables littered with peanut shells and Styrofoam cups. A big TV with a satellite box locked in a cabinet with a Plexiglas door. The remotes dangling from it on cables. Babs wasn't around to lock them up.

That was really the issue. Because of the commotion Martha had lost her place on Express Vue. Lost Insatiable Co-Eds. I told George Sand as sternly as I could without laughing. Harassment was grounds for eviction. I told her to get out of the lounge, Salle Pleyel, Shangri-La, Villa Wahnfried, Paradise.

"Just let me finish my cigarette," she pleaded, flourishing her crop.

Jon Thomas Rowland

She had the cigarette between her lips, lit. I said no, get out right now. I picked her butt up off the floor where she'd thrown it down and hurled it into the doorway on my way out. The flaming cig.

*

I heard shouting on the third floor. It was Michael. Usually so quiet and so small. Adam had warned me about his shouting. It was something I'd have to learn to put up with. It could be blood curdling. That was strong language for Adam, but not inaccurate. The shouts grew louder as he descended the dark-varnished stairs. I was on the second floor landing when he passed me, shouting and beating his ears so fast his fists were blurry. I followed him downstairs.

He halted in front of the reinforced glass door of the office. There was no one there. I was alone, and I was on his side of the glass. I knew what he wanted. He turned to me, cringing. His shiny hair accentuated his pallor. He had a good complexion, a handsome face, despite his thirst for soft drinks and his habit of slashing his cheeks with disposable razors. We thought the voices drove him to it, but his behavior was also manipulative. It was probably significant that he used disposable razors, because they weren't very strong and tended to make shallow cuts. He'd look terrible for a few days, but the cuts healed quickly and all but vanished in a week.

When he cut himself he'd get a sedative or two. Maybe even a couple of cigarettes. That was what he really wanted, but it wasn't worth permanently disfiguring himself. The sedatives would have turned down the voices, but not turned them off. Maybe he enjoyed them for other reasons. Maybe he was hooked. Now and then the hospital would get concerned and try to cut him off no matter how much he cut his face.

Caspar called him the human meat loaf. He'd offer to apply some ointment to the wounds. At first he'd refuse. Caspar would insist. Eventually he'd comply, and turn one cheek and then the other. After all, Caspar was the alpha male. When the cutting didn't get results, Michael would run away.

Adam said he liked to stay in the hospital because it was an opportunity to build up his bank account. He didn't have to spend any money while he was there, but some government money was deposited to his account anyway. When he'd built up a small sum, he'd elope. Babs said he was institutionalized. The hospital was not merely where he wanted to be (and he desperately wanted to be there). It was where he really was when he was nominally with us.

Come to think of it, his elopements only made sense in the context of the hospital. Eloping was a part of the hospital system. Canada's first psychiatrist (he was called an alienist) wrote that it was the right of every mental patient to elope; it

Jon Thomas Rowland

was a poor asylum, from which one could not elope. It went with wards, walls, and barred windows from which it was possible to sling two knotted sheets without danger of falling.

It was not a part of our system. I doubt we even had one. We improvised. There was no point in running away from us. It was unnecessary, and it was too easy. We were a "non-custodial facility." All we had on our windows were flimsy screens. They'd not have held a baby's weight, let alone a man or a woman's. There were no wards that one could trick a foot-sore nurse into thinking one was sleeping in, with a score of sleepers. Our feet were often sore, but we only minded a few shared rooms. Michael was just doing what people did in mental hospitals. Perhaps he figured that if he did it long enough he'd eventually be there physically as well as mentally.

We never found out what he did, though we knew where he went. I don't think he did much at all. Going home by streetcar early in the morning, Babs would see him sipping a coffee on a park bench in a seedy Hogtown neighborhood. Every Hogtown neighborhood was seedy. He could have gone anywhere to sip his coffee, although in most places he couldn't have stayed longer than fifteen minutes. The cheaper coffee shops were more lenient. There were plenty of those where he lived. I suppose they couldn't afford to risk alienating their clientele. If you loitered in any of these establishments you'd eventually notice that a large proportion

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

of the customers had a tick. You'd notice that someone was staring too long at his hand. Another was talking to himself. Another was writing. It was more than just a tick however. The whole city was like that. What was the use of running away?

Once a day he'd leave the House to go shopping and come back with a liter bottle of Coke and a small white plastic bag of toiletries. If I saw him returning, huddled and oppressed-looking in a long coat even in the summer, I'd ask him if he wouldn't mind letting me look in the bag. I know I was intrusive, and his worker would not have approved, but as Adam said, his worker wasn't responsible either.

Of course I knew what he wanted. "PRN?" I asked. He made a barely perceptible nod, his handsome scratched and bleeding face averted, probably suppressing a smile.

*

When I relieved Caspar he was furious. Michael had cut his face for the second time in a row. What else wasn't new?

Michael had presented himself, principally his cut and bleeding face, at the reinforced glass of the office door. I thought of it as a form of closed-circuit television, but unlike the security video it was bi-directional, live, and totally functional. His face was a commercial for a "PRN," like a

Jon Thomas Rowland

"spot" for UNICEF. Twice in one evening must have been too much, because when Serge saw him, he shouted too, and started to talk fast. He let Michael into the office, still talking fast, and waving his arms like a manic film director. Michael was ready for his close-up now.

I imagined the rest. It was hard to remain calm, because as soon as he got into the office Michael would start to shout at someone named Peter to "Get out of my room, Peter." Then he'd tell "Peter" he didn't know what he was looking for. He wasn't a thief. I assumed that he was laying it on a bit thick for our benefit. He was intelligent enough, and probably calculating enough too, to know that now was his chance to make a big scene, in our crummy little office, where his shouts and screams would be deafening, and we couldn't avoid his face.

I later found out that "Peter" was the name of my predecessor. Adam described him as a "train wreck." He had been notably insecure and eccentric in a field full of insecure eccentrics. Caspar didn't like him either. He said he'd have made a great psychiatrist, if he hadn't been a schizophrenic. He said he was shrewd. He was very perceptive about personality. I wondered if Caspar was as usual partly right. Maybe schizophrenia made him acute.

On the way back from that funeral home in the middle of nowhere Caspar told me what he'd told him. That Adam was really full of anger. That explained his quietness. It was

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

repressed rage. I told Caspar that I thought Adam was often acting. He usually seemed calm, easy-going, even-tempered. I saw something else when I watched him for a few moments one afternoon in the kitchen when he thought no one was there. He looked devastated. Maybe as long as he felt someone was watching he was just acting. Caspar said he'd said the same thing.

I can just imagine the scene as Michael laid it on for manic Serge, shouting at long gone Peter to shut up, get out of his room and leave his stuff alone, beating his face with hands as fast as airplane propellers, making his cuts weep fresh tears. He too was an actor.

Serge did what he usually did, which was inconsistent with the national character. It also seemed inconsistent with his past, which Serge once told me was pure punk. Maybe he was pure phony.

Serge called the cops. They came but they were annoyed because there was nothing they could do. It was obvious. Serge asked Michael if he wanted them to take him to the hospital. He said no. That was just as well because the cops wouldn't have taken him anyway. It was illegal.

*

Even when we weren't aware of having bugs, Babs patrolled

Jon Thomas Rowland

the House in rubber gloves and a surgical mask, the "front line worker." Jack wiped his nose on his hand, then wiped his hand on the door-knob when he turned it to enter the office. Babs shuddered to think what she might touch with her bare hand.

She used to bring Jack's urine-filled cups and glasses into the office and deposit them on top of the "meds" cabinet. They were the murder weapons from the crime scene. They were "Exhibit A." She'd photograph them and staple the photograph beside his entry in the common log. Then she'd leave them on top of the "meds" cabinet. She had peculiar notions of where things belonged.

Adam used to knock over the glasses when he faxed our time-sheets to Head Office. He'd swear at Babs, call her a clown, and threaten to write an entry in the common log forbidding her to bring any more of Jack's urine into the office. I think Babs's obsessiveness overcame her aversion to filth.

I used to leave my knapsack in the corner between the "meds" cabinet and the wall on which we hung our coats. It has been anointed more than once with Jack's spilled urine. I don't know what the fuss was about. Worse things are transmitted by air. We inhaled the effluvia of one another's lungs, and bowels. Adam wasn't the only one with bad gas. Alice stuffed herself then released a rouser in the office that made me check the garbage for something burning. The

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

hallway stank of Laura's dirty feet. Louis didn't mind. He loved her just as she was.

Babs found lice in the second floor bathroom sink. They came from the clump of hair in the comb Charlene left on the commode before she went to bed. They were alive. They were still alive when I went up to see. I thought they died when they left their host. That was either a myth or they were especially sturdy bugs. They were gymnasts. They jumped. Their champions succumbed in the bowl and died. They speckled the enamel.

That morning Adam called the mental hospital and spoke to Charlene's worker. She accused us of slovenliness. We had to strip all the beds, wash all the bedding, and treat every tenant with permethrin. When Adam muttered something about our being a team, she threatened to call the Department of Health. Adam said he'd call them himself.

Charlene's worker cut her hair at the hospital. It was a hatchet job, but the sight of all those bugs dying under her clippers made her feel like a real "front line worker." She felt so good about herself she called us as soon as she'd finished. Charlene was coming back to us wearing a baseball cap over her bald pate. She had a big head. Her worker had a swelled one.

They called themselves Psychiatric Advocates, Social Workers, Front Line Workers. They were fighting in society's trenches, on behalf of the outcasts society shoved there. They were "Anti-Oppressionists," according to community college course descriptions. Really they were pretty much what Caspar said they were: lazy and fucked-up.

Adam was more charitable. Discussing the field with him one evening, I said I thought I thought it attracted a lot of losers. He said it attracted a lot of insecure people. I thought Adam himself was the principal exception, until it happened. Only a week ago he'd been talking about flue shots. There was a shortage of the vaccine but he'd qualify because he was a "Front Line Worker."

I remember watching him sprawling as usual in the office-chair beside the computer. He asked me if I had a G.P. Of course I didn't. It looked like it was going to be a really bad flue season. He'd already had a bad cold that he still couldn't get rid of. It kept coming back. Now it was in his chest. He slapped it with his large hand. He thought all the staff should get their shots this year.

*

Sam was Betty's worker. Betty showed me a picture that Sam had given her of a room in his house, full of caged

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

birds. Sam was always going on about how much Betty had improved since he'd been working with her. He knew that I used to take Betty shopping. He pretended to be grateful but I believe he resented my involvement.

Serge had been Betty's worker before her and he was the same. When he heard that I'd taken Betty out for a coffee, he thanked me as if I'd taken him myself. Betty was their cash cow. For a while Serge remained her worker too, although Sam had officially taken over. That was fine with Betty. Adam said Serge was just using her to pad his caseload. For Betty it meant being spoiled.

I offended Sam by helping Betty buy a whole case of pop at the "No Frills." Otherwise she'd have spent her meager pin money buying it from the Koreans at three or four times its value. Sam said I was ruining her diet. Betty was fat with a bad face rash but there was nothing in her life besides trips to the Goodwill, the occasional movie, and treats. She borrowed movies from the office and watched them alone in her room. Her taste ran to low-budget slasher movies featuring bad actors with hairy shoulders and buckets of blood.

We were always getting cigs for the other tenants. Cigs gave you cancer. Betty didn't even smoke. Cokes gave you stomachache and made you fat, but it didn't matter. Betty was already fat. Her weight didn't change. I think she could have starved to death without losing weight. Cokes weren't

Jon Thomas Rowland

any worse than smokes.

Nonetheless Sam had to do something to assert himself. That's what her intervention was about. He settled for exchanging Betty's regular cokes for diet. I remember him balancing the case on his ample thigh on his way back to the "No Frills," lecturing us on how wrong it was to ruin Betty's diet. What a fine, pro-active worker.

Adam was better. Staff routinely emptied all the cans of pop into a pitcher, thinking that it discouraged waste. Adam would never do so. He asked me if I wouldn't rather have my own pop. Of course I would. Adam put the tenants' dignity above such parsimonious economizing. He always made the imaginative effort to put himself in the tenants' situation.

Sam and Serge were insecure. That was confirmed for me again one afternoon when Sam came into the office and I caught his bird-eyes studying me as I gave Gabriel his 4 o'clock meds. He said he didn't want to butt in (which was a lie) but I'd just committed a major medication error. I'd tapped the pills into my hand first, and then handed them to Gabriel. That meant I was dispensing. We could be sued for that. I explained that Gabriel's hands had been too unsteady for me to give him his pills straight out of the dosette. There were worse things for which we could be sued. There were things for which we deserved to be sued.

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

But who would bother? Society? We were society, the same way we were community. We were parsimonious economizing manifest. What about all the times the hospital screwed up the “meds” because they'd laid off all the trained pharmacists? What about all the times the manager sat hunched over a dosette on the little round table, picking out little bright-colored pills with his forceps, because a team with an inappropriately ballsy name had carelessly put them in the wrong slot? We had to touch the meds, with hands or forceps, or poison the tenant. One way or another, we were always getting them dirty. There were neurotoxins on our hands as well as in our sewage.

The manager overheard this exchange. I watched as she slowly removed her glasses and rubbed her brow. We'd interrupted her accounting. Later she told me to ignore Sam. He was on our health and safety committee. He'd previously never sat his ample ass on anything bigger than a toilet. He took his role too seriously. He hadn't noticed it was all cosmetic.

By then Adam had returned from the kitchen where he'd been finishing the tacos. I said Sam was a bastard. Adam said to stop complaining and "play the game." That was very British.

*

It bothers me to think that as Adam was getting ready to die

Jon Thomas Rowland

I was typing on my laptop. I might even have been playing a computer game. Adam hated computers. A few days ago we were working in the kitchen and I told him about emulators. He knew about my programmer friend. He couldn't find work in his field. He spent a lot of time thinking about games and memory. Games consumed enormous amounts of memory. Adam said he thought we should get out of our little "box" and see more of the real world. I showed him my genuine Commodore Business Machines wristwatch. He laughed at it. I told him about the emulator for the Commodore 64 and how all I had to do was download it and some games. "Yahoo," he said.

I was also drinking beer and listening to Tristan. It was a long opera so I would have been listening to the Liebestod in the morning. That was more appropriate. One afternoon last week we were standing on the front porch of the House. He'd offered me one of his Lucky Strikes to smoke with him before he went home. It was a part of our routine. I didn't take it because I still had that bad cold. Adam said that meant I wasn't a true smoker. True smokers would just "smoke through." It was six o'clock and already getting dark. I said it reminded me of standing on the porch last year. I repeated what I said then, that it was like looking down a dark tunnel into winter, and Christmas.

I showed him the Tristan, one of those historical performances on Naxos that I was always buying. I'd loaned him a recording of Scriabin's preludes. He listened to it but

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

didn't like it. He said it sounded like it was performed on an old upright. He called Scriabin "Scabies." He noticed right away that the Tristan was marked "AAD." I explained that it was still the best version in the catalog, conducted by Wilhelm Furtwangler. He didn't care. It must have been my ability to buy compact disks whenever I wanted that made him sigh: "I'm so tired of being broke." That was something else that hadn't changed.

*

Our conversations are framed by darkness like old b-movies. I see Adam in his light-colored clothing against a dark background, like one of the protagonists of White Zombie. He left after six. The dark background is the night that starting in October got noticeably longer every day, started a few minutes earlier every shift. Working with Adam while the manager was on vacation was like being on some strange ride at the Exhibition, after the grounds were closed to normals.

It was the "Polar Express" headed into winter and eternal night. The riders were Gabriel, Frederick (not Fred), Michael, Jack, Karl, Leon, Charlene, et al. Adam and I sat together in a gondola. We didn't hold hands. We did our best to keep everyone from panicking and falling out. There wasn't much we could do except tell them to hold on. It was when you tried to get off that you might get hurt. By mid-

Jon Thomas Rowland

February it never seemed to end.

The atmosphere changed when it got dark outside the big bay window. It made our crummy office like a parlor again. The bedside table-lamps on the mantle and the little round table weren't just chintzy. They were intimate. Adam's voice was reassuring. I said I wanted a voice like his was all the time. So smooth it seemed pasteurized. What an asset for a "front-line worker." He said he was just burn-out. I said maybe he needed another vacation. He said he thought he'd go away. I said that wasn't a good idea. It was hard to get a job these days. He stared at me for a moment. It was as if someone had broken the big bay window and the night rushed in with the cold air to emphasize that wasn't what he meant.

*

Getting off is just escapism. Who knows what into? It might take billions of years for the polar express to arrive at that station somewhere north of Archangel. North of Finland. But it will. Global warming will only be a memory growing cold. Getting off is the surest way to arrive ahead of schedule. The station master will be a skeleton made of ashes and glue. He'll speak Russian and Italian. Adam always wanted to learn another language. He'll offer Caspar one of his daughters and a Lucky Strike.

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

*

The door-bell rang during the evening shift. It wasn't Friday, so it couldn't be the nice young man from the pharmacy with Leon's "meds." I thought it was one of the client's friends, usually a client too, from one of the other group homes in the neighborhood. There already were quite a few Emile Durkheim Houses, but I always seemed to be hearing about new ones opening up. Another agency had purchased the mansion across the street for two million dollars.

We were all agents of the government. The manager was confident that we represented the future. She had only to refer me to her special computer program that calculated the millions Emile Durkheim House saved society for every day that every client was a tenant in the House as opposed to a patient in the Hospital, and I was convinced that we were at once as artificial and unnecessary as anything else that was man-made and as inevitable as a force of nature. I only wondered how we'd ever avoid living in such a place ourselves. Well, there was one way.

I answered the door as was my duty, but it wasn't one of their friends but one of mine. Like Adam's wife, Joe hadn't been able to find work in computing.

I hadn't seen him since I told him I never wanted to see him again. That was because he wouldn't let me rub his back. I'd

Jon Thomas Rowland

wanted to do that and more almost since I first saw him, two years ago, when I was working in a junk store owned by the cunt-struck seaman referred to above. That was before he got evicted. He hung out with me at the store, possibly because there wasn't much happening at home. There wasn't much happening in the store either, but at least there was some company. I enjoyed his company.

I suppose that was why I tried to help him out, with small amounts of money, some food, and cigarettes. It was natural. I liked him, and I knew he was broke. I was grateful that he accepted what I had to offer. He reciprocated by showing up at closing time to help me bring in the heavier stuff, dressers and cedar chests and mahogany table-tops.

Yet by some dynamic I still don't understand, in a few months Joe was working in the store and I was out of a job. I know my manic so-called boss had a lot to do with it. Joe was also manic. That might have explained the kids, who also started to hang out at the store. His oldest son would run away and have to be brought back home by the cops, whom he'd regale on the way by telling them the plots of the last x-rated movies he'd watched with his old man. That brought the cops around the store and created a lot of trouble for me. It upset me more than the seaman, who wasn't phased by anything sexual or by cops either, with whom he dealt quite comfortably, thug to thug. Joe and the seaman wore me out, till one afternoon when the seaman started to whine about my ten percent I just quit. I

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

happened to meet Joe on my way home, all dressed up and insouciant, and told him to fuck himself. Then he started to work in the store, and a little later I started to work in the House, though not without nearly starving first. Joe never visited me, though I often saw him pass my yard, with its pathetic sale, as carefree as ever.

I was glad to see him. I still wanted to rub his back.

We chatted for a few minutes on the porch. I was afraid if I let him in, we'd trade places again. I offered him fifty bucks, and expressed the wish that he be more affectionate (i.e., let me rub his back). He said he would. Suddenly Charlene escalated and threw a bunch of old shoes over the balcony into the yard. It was some sort of commentary on us. Joe asked me to escort him out of the yard and to say good-bye to him out of sight of the camera. He didn't know, they didn't record anything. I did it.

*

Last spring Adam and I went with Gabriel to the annual general meeting. It was a rubber stamp. The manager presented the budget and asked for someone to move that it be accepted. She looked around the auditorium. No one stirred. Finally Gabriel stood up. "I just want to say," he began. Adam tugged at his sleeve. "Just say you move that we accept it." He did.

Next was a presentation by a woman who'd directed a movie about the relationship between mentally ill people and the police. The director was a well-heeled Bohemian from the suburbs. She'd spent several hours riding around with the cops as they responded to crises by arresting the clients involved in them and bringing them in for "assessment." She said it all came down to a three-point support plan. Housing, family, and friends. Afterwards Adam observed that all of our tenants had been abandoned by their families. Few of them had strong friendships. It would require a very strong friendship to withstand so much hardship and loss. We offered housing or at least shelter, but they were always getting evicted or running away. When the woman referred to the cops as our frontline mental health workers, Sophy, who had come on her own for the free food, guffawed loudly, swore, and walked out. The woman from the suburbs tried to ignore her.

She seemed relieved when Samantha put up her hand to talk. At her most unctuous, Samantha told us how much she liked the police. They'd never given her any trouble. When she was stranded in the middle of nowhere, they always gave her a ride home. I remembered such episodes. The manager wanted her to walk, but she'd frighten the locals so much, with her catatonic posturing and delusional friends, that they'd call the police to have her removed.

Samantha's relationship with the police wasn't amicable.

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

With one lover she stole from the other, and evaded punishment because that lover who stole was under age and she herself couldn't be held responsible because she was crazy (like a fox). Samantha did her best to use the cops as a private escort service to her "spa," the relatively luxurious St. Onan's, where she eloped whenever she was broke and "feeling suicidal." She overdid it when, to get them to pick her up at Emile Durkheim House, she claimed to be a murderer, the object of a grim and intensive man-hunt. I don't know what they said to her. I'm sure it wasn't amicable.

After the presentation, Adam, Gabriel and I went outside with some of the other tenants. Adam smoked a Lucky Strike. He dispensed house cigarettes to the others, Sam's objections notwithstanding. The lasagna was greasy. Frederick (not Fred) complained. Now his stomach was as sore as his bum. Caspar would have told him his bum at least got sore from letting too many men stick their dicks up it. Adam told him to work it off. March up and down on the spot. He showed him how.

*

Joe let me rub his back. He'd called me on my cell-phone around 10 A.M., after I'd done the midnight shift. I asked him to come by around noon. He did. I think my sleep deprivation had lowered my inhibitions, because this time I

Jon Thomas Rowland

asked him more directly than usual. I said afterwards I'd take him to dinner in Chinatown.

I think he felt that if he didn't let me, it would spoil our day. I remember him standing still in the middle of my dilapidated kitchen, with the ceiling flaking and the tiles lifting because of the dampness from the leaky roof. He'd was wearing a blue jacket and he'd already put on his knapsack. He turned his back to me, but I didn't want to rub it through several layers of material. He removed the jacket so I could at least rub his neck and the tops of his shoulders. He was smooth. He smelled like the soap he'd showered with that morning. I think it was "Irish Spring."

*

Joe started coming around. I wouldn't say regularly, but once every two or three weeks. I relaxed about letting him enter the House. I didn't have much choice, since Adam usually answered the door and invited him inside.

I told Adam about Joe and me, and the store. He said he thought Joe needed a swift kick in the ass. Then, more tenderly, he asked me if Joe had sought any kind of help. I said I thought Joe had exhausted all the help. Adam thought he would still be eligible for welfare. He'd been a social worker all his life, whereas I'd been virtually a client all of mine. He naturally had more confidence in the "social

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

safety net" than I did. I asked him if he thought I should accompany Joe to the Welfare office, and hold his hand. He said well, yes.

*

One night in particular makes me think it was planned. It was as if he wanted to tell me some things first. He let me make him a coffee in a Styrofoam cup. I made it strong. He quaffed it all at once and shook his head like a dog coming out of the water. It was instant so it was bitter. Then we went upstairs and he sat with me in the office after six o'clock. His shift ended at six. He usually left a few minutes early. It was getting dark outside.

Adam wanted to warn me about Gladys. Gladys was still angry with me because I'd complained about her for accusing me of treating the tenants "like shit." I'd been following standard procedures. Sophy came to the office just as I was about to give Gladys shift change. She complained that she was out of cigarettes. I said I was sorry but I couldn't do anything about it, as she'd had her cigarettes for the day. She said she wanted her cigarettes for the next day (she got a pack a day, each one dated). I again said no, because that would only leave her short tomorrow.

Gladys got involved, scoffed at the arrangement, and demanded to know if Sophy had consented to it. Sophy

Jon Thomas Rowland

denied she had. Gladys ignored my whispered information that Sophy had a memory problem, indeed had Korsakov's syndrome, and had probably given consent and forgotten all about it. She scowled. Sophy told me to fuck myself and stormed out of the office. When I tried to resume shift-change, Gladys kept grumbling about my alleged mistreatment of Sophy. When I came to Sophy's name on the list, and mentioned that she wasn't supposed to get more than one pack of cigs a day, Gladys ignored me. I asked her several times if she'd heard me.

Suddenly Gladys flared at me and accused me of treating her like a little girl. I told Gladys that I merely wanted to finish shift-change without having to listen to her negativity. I also wanted to be sure she was paying attention. She let me finish, but with an ill grace. Later, when we were serving in the kitchen, she accused me of treating the tenants "like shit."

I don't know why Gladys became so incensed about our arrangement with Sophy. She followed the same procedure herself with Gabriel and Jack, and was always warning me not to let them scam me for extra cigs. Harriet Parsons made Gladys apologize. At first she denied everything. Then she prevaricated. She said she'd accused me of treating the tenants "like dirt."

Her principal line of defense was what she termed "our good relationship." She showed the "Team Leader" the sunglasses

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

I'd given her. She said I was always giving her CDs. That was my defense. It never occurred to her that such behavior was inconsistent with treating people like shit or dirt. She offered a half-assed apology and took a week off to recover. When she got back she did it all over again. Nothing was done about it by Harriet.

Because of Gladys's irresponsibility the House couldn't accommodate anyone with serious problems. Gladys simply couldn't be trusted to do the work that would keep them and the rest of the House secure. She was why Joan and Jack were evicted. No team was stronger than its weakest member. With Gladys, there effectively was no team.

Adam said Gladys was still grumbling about me. He warned me to be careful what I said in front of her. That was generous considering that a while ago we'd had a loud argument in Gladys's presence. At least the worst of it happened during break.

Adam usually came to work at a quarter to ten. That was what we were supposed to do, till Babs became uncomfortable with it. I'd started at a quarter to 8 and was just finishing the morning meds when he called to say he'd be late. He was going shopping. He assured me he wouldn't be any later than 10:30 however. He didn't like to leave a relief person alone during the day. I think Adam wanted to feel needed. In reality there was nothing we did that anyone couldn't do. Whether or not anyone really would was

Jon Thomas Rowland

another matter. Who would even know?

The locksmith arrived around 10 to install a combination lock on the back door. It was something the manager and Adam had decided to do. I thought it was a bad idea. They probably hadn't thought about it at all. The locksmith should have come earlier. The maintenance man gave the locksmith our address then forgot to meet him.

The locksmith saw Karl sitting on the steps and asked him if he'd called him. Karl had had another quarrel with Mack that morning. He told the locksmith to fuck off. I noticed him sitting in his truck and invited him into the House.

Adam arrived around 10:30. I was talking to the locksmith as Adam got out of his little car and removed the purple bins from the trunk. The bins were heavy. I returned to the office and looked out the bay window just as he started to carry them into the basement. He was wearing shorts and I saw that his knees were swollen. I could tell they were bothering him by the way he carried the bins. I went out to give him a hand. I saluted him from the steps.

That is one of the indelible images I have of him, running in the background since I first saw it. Unlike the tapes in the security video, it's legible. Adam carries the purple bin with the four-liter bags of milk. I know it's heavy, because I've carried it myself. He wears a checked short-sleeved shirt open over a white T-shirt, shorts, gym socks, and running

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House
shoes. The "Roots" bag hangs from his shoulder. I notice
the bandage under the brace, and the brace itself.

Unfortunately before I'd even carried a bin into the kitchen I
started to complain about that stupid lock. He asked me to
please let him get settled first. He liked to take his time in
the morning. He would put his "Roots" bag on the worn
office chair beside the computer. He'd remove his Ray Ban
glasses and put them away in their case. Finally he'd hang up
his bag on one of the hooks beside the mantle. Then he was
ready for shift change.

I sat down at the little round table. I started with Jack. That
morning I hadn't found any urine in cups on his dresser.
The clothes weren't wet in his hamper, so he hadn't urinated
there either. I proceeded down the list, reading from a sheet
of yellow foolscap. Joan was out. Ellie had drunk a whole
liter of orange juice. Nothing new. I said I'd had no contact
with Laura.

Adam stopped me. Wasn't that Laura he'd just seen finishing
her breakfast in the dining room? It was. I was reading the
notes I'd taken two hours ago during shift-change with Babs.
Adam loved to trip me up. It was something one did to
one's understudy. I apologized and resumed shift change.
There wasn't anything important. Someone was getting
some cumin that he hadn't got before. So and so's cigs
and pin money had arrived for the weekend, two packs and
a two dollar coin taped to each pack. Someone's clozapine

Jon Thomas Rowland

had been increased by 25mg. Nothing major.

I returned to the topic of the lock. I was against it. The back door opened into a smoking lounge in a remote part of the House. It was full of expensive audio-visual equipment, all in plain view. The room had already been plundered once. Adam was in one of his dogmatic moods and asserted that if it was a security problem it was because we weren't doing our job. He meant that since we were supposed to do rounds every hour, we'd catch anyone sneaking in through the back. I took offense.

I stood up. My voice shook. The manager had warned me about getting too emotional. Maybe I needed anger management, and something for O.C.D. as well. Adam's voice was always so even, so well-modulated. He said it was because he was burnt out. I asked him as steadily as I could if the loss of several thousand dollars worth of audio-visual equipment would be casually written off. It was a stupid rhetorical question. Of course it would. The idiots from Head Office ran around the House every October, distributing laminated cat posters and plants in macramé holders, trying to use up their surplus. Meanwhile they couldn't afford to hire more full-time staff or give relief workers any benefits. If you got liver disease unplugging toilets it was just too bad. They had more money than brains. A lot more.

Adam told me to act like an adult, not a wise thing to say to a

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

man who was getting upset, and who was convinced that he was right.

He got up and went over to his "Roots" bag hanging as usual beside the mantle. He removed two cigarettes from the pack of Lucky Strikes. He tapped me on the shoulder, the cigarettes extended between the fingers of his hand. Come on, he said. I wouldn't go.

At 3:30 Adam told me I could go home. I said I knew. I was being dismissed. Usually he let me stay for shift change with Gladys. He probably wanted me to go before Gladys had a chance to see how distraught I was. It would only have confirmed her worst suspicions about my "certifiability."

I foiled Adam's good intentions. He and Gladys were smoking on the porch. I was sitting on my porch next door. I was still angry. I called over to Gladys. Hey, I said. I think I'll come over tonight and steal a television from the lounge, since I know the combination. Adam wheeled around. Ass-hole, he called me. I said he was an ass-hole himself. He said if I had "issues" with him, we'd go for a walk and discuss them like adults. I wish I'd gone. That was treating me like a wife.

*

Jon Thomas Rowland

I think Gladys was jealous of what she considered Patricia and Babs's "certifiability." She suspected me too. In the context it would have been a lot more useful than my doctorate. It would have opened doors, presented options, created opportunities. It was membership in a club which automatically got you invited elsewhere. There was something to Gladys's position.

I now realize that Adam might have "belonged" more than anyone (except perhaps myself), but for some reason chose not to exercise his privileges. He never played that card. Yet I remember one morning he told me. "I'm crazy, " he said. "We all are." He meant himself, Patricia, Babs - even Gladys. Despite how desperately I wanted to belong there, with him, he hadn't included me. Maybe it was only stating the obvious, but I'm still jealous.

*

Now I have a lot of leisure time. I haunt the local hot-spots. Places he wouldn't be caught dead in. I get out of bed. It's difficult without a job and Adam to go to. I still wake up at shift change time. Part of me wants to get back to work. I used to be so glad to get those last minute calls from the manager or Babs. I was usually told only that Patricia wouldn't be coming in that day for her usual 8 to 4 P.M. shift. Sometimes Babs told me, with a confidential air and a request to keep it to myself, that she was depressed. For all I

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House
cared she could have been suicidal.

They didn't want Gladys to know. Gladys wasn't supposed to know if one of them had a tooth ache. Gladys didn't care and either way I got to work with Adam. Most of the time I worked for him too. I would bake cookies, cook chicken breasts and do roasts at night, things Babs never attempted. The whole house benefited, but the whole house never thanked me. Adam told me how much he appreciated it. Once after I'd worked a week of midnights, Adam told me how much he was going to miss my help after Babs got back. He said he didn't know why the company didn't fire her and hire a security guard at minimum wage. That's all she was.

I make strong coffee. I steam the milk in a Pyrex measuring cup and pour it over the coffee in a glass. I have that while I type something on my lap-top. Then I go for a walk, usually to the Sally Anne at Lansdowne and the Goodwill at the end of Thing Street. Most of the customers should be committed. They're certifiable.

Today an old guy bothered me at the Sally Anne. He was very nosy about a Yashika movie camera that I was examining. He obviously wanted it for himself, so he started to give me all kinds of advice. He said I wouldn't be able to get film for it, it didn't have any batteries, etc. When I walked down an aisle to escape him, I heard him tell the cashier to watch me, I was going to steal it. That made me angry. I walked up to the counter, told the man to shut his

Jon Thomas Rowland

trap, and bought it. I heard him grumbling behind me. Canadians were crazy.

*

Adam tired himself out last fall by helping his brother move. He also more trouble than ever sleeping that night, because of the pain. Carting stuff up and down stairs was especially hard on his bad knees. I asked him why he didn't just say no. He said he couldn't say no to his brother. I believe his brother was capable of saying no to him. A little later I told Adam they must be close, but he said they weren't. Why put himself out, then? I'm convinced that he had no one.

*

We were standing on the steps. Adam was smoking. I was saying something about the stress that went with our work. I said I coped with it by turning into someone else. I said I guessed that sounded pretty bad. Adam said it sure did. The cell-phone rang. I saw that it was from his wife, and handed him the phone. He left me alone on the porch for a few moments to talk to her privately in the office. When he got back I could see how tired he was. I guessed it had been a hard day. His cigarette was nearly exhausted too, and beginning to burn the railing. We resumed our conversation but without the same enthusiasm.

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

Please don't be schizophrenic, he said. He must have thought that was what I meant. I was his friend. He probably couldn't bear to think that his friend might be mentally ill.

I never told him that the "someone else" I tried to become was him. When I felt myself wanting to shout at Gabriel for asking me for a cigarette every five minutes, I remembered the level tone of his voice and tried to imitate it. When I was tired and wanted to cut corners by not sweeping behind the garbage pail in the kitchen, I moved it and swept behind it in his name. When Samantha tried my patience by begging me to call the police because she had an axe and was worse than Lizzie Borden, I remembered his reasonable firmness and remained calm. When the staff demoralized me with their mean sloth and ill-concealed sham idealism, I followed his example and did my job. As much as possible I did it the same way he did his. He eschewed idealism. He just did the best he could so no one could say he didn't.

It was just a job. People like Gladys or Serge, who blew hard about "being there for THEM," weren't doing the job. They never cleaned anything. They cooked only when they felt like it, which was seldom. They slept all night. They forgot to sign for medications. Sometimes they forgot to give them at all. Face it. They were there for money. Adam was there for money too, and to do as good a job as he could. Maybe in the end he felt it just wasn't good enough.

I remember him teasing me because I worked so hard in the kitchen. At night I'd cook enough for the next three days. He said I couldn't compete with him, but a few days before he killed himself he sampled everything I'd cooked that day and said it was "all good."

*

Our "big argument" is easy for me to live with, because there was wrong on both sides. Our next-to-last conversation is harder for me to think about, because it was really a one-sided attack. It was mean. I was angry with Adam over something trivial. He had been angry himself with the staff. I think with Babs for not taking any initiative, and for never cleaning anything, because she was always feuding with Gladys. Her principal work at night was making ten sandwiches for lunch. They were what Caspar called "prison fare," a slice of bologna between two slices of "Wonder" bread slathered with margarine. She had to be told to use up the roast.

Without guidance she would lock things up, put away things we needed to use, post signs telling the tenants what to do, etc. There wasn't any guidance. Adam and I tried to get the manager to stop Babs from locking up the T.V. set in the smoking lounge. Every midnight, shortly after coming on duty, she'd go into the lounge, turn off the T.V., and lock it,

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

even if the tenant was in the middle of a program that he wanted to watch. Several of the tenants had complained to Adam, Gladys, and myself. Tenants were afraid to start watching a movie around midnight, because they knew Babs would interrupt them.

While this might seem trivial, it was directly contrary to the ethos of the House as a home, a "non-custodial" facility. Babs offered no excuse other than the noise. Yet the tenants routinely slept with their radios blaring. Babs herself was always entering their rooms at night to turn them down. They slept through fire alarms. Half of them symbolically burned to death every fire drill. When we suggested that Babs simply ask the tenant to turn down the volume, she told us that it was "her" shift and what she did on "her" shift was "her" business - or in other words none of ours.

Julia used to go drinking. Before leaving she'd pace up and down the second floor hall. She'd leave her door open and turn up her radio. The first time I heard her singing along I thought he was escalating. I ran upstairs to offer her a sedative. If she was going out, she wouldn't take anything.

She looked slightly Gothic in her long floor-length coat over a long black gown. Like most of the tenants she had an enormous wardrobe, and only wore a portion of it. That portion was like a thin layer of topsoil over slag heaps. I knew because I'd cleaned her room several times. Before I could mop the floor I had to spend a lot of time sorting the

Jon Thomas Rowland

clothes that covered the floor, the dresser, the end-tables, and even part of the bed. I hung some of them up, but her closet already bulged like Gabriel's. Once I filled half a dozen green garbage bags with clothes that I'd never seen her wear. Julia asked me where I was putting them. I told her in the unused elevator shaft. I didn't tell her that after that I was putting them out on the curb. She never inquired about them again.

Adam said none of tenants knew the value of clothing because they never had to work for it. Some of it was contributed by an ancient charity run by retired nurses at the asylum. The rest was provided free every year by workers. Adam couldn't go a week without repeating a garment.

Julia went out around 11 P.M. looking slightly Gothic in her long coat and gown. She wore dark glasses even at midnight. She usually carried a mean-looking piece of iron that she wore like a dagger in her belt. Maybe she had enemies. No one knew where she went, though it was rumored she had a boy-friend. I told Adam maybe that was what the crowbar was for. He asked me rather sharply what I knew about it. I told him not much but I'd read a lot of books. He said he was sorry.

Julia never came back drunk to anyone's knowledge except Babs's. So far as Babs knew she always did. Babs was convinced. She wrote notes in the common log. Client returned at 2:45 A.M. and came to staff in kitchen. Client

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

showed obvious signs of intoxication. Adam said the part about being in the kitchen was supposed to show us how hard Babs was working, making prison sandwiches. Gladys thought she slept most of the night. It would have been better if she had.

The part about "obvious" signs of intoxication annoyed Adam. What was so obvious? The common log wasn't supposed to contain assertions or value judgments, only statements of fact. So and so had an appointment at such and such a time. Samantha refused to take her meds. Julia mopped the dining room floor, etc. The last fact should have indicated to Babs the improbability of Julia's being drunk. Cleaning was Julia's only job. She didn't make enough at it to get "obviously" drunk.

The trouble started when Babs asked Gladys to give Julia her meds in a little envelope, to take at the appropriate time "in community," as the saying was. This time the "community" was a tavern. Gladys said Babs just didn't want to be bothered giving Julia her meds at 2 A.M. She wanted to sleep. It was a bad idea because it meant that instead of getting her "meds" late, Julia probably wouldn't get them at all. She'd forget about them or throw them in the garbage. Gladys refused to co-operate, and this time the manager supported her.

Subsequently Babs became obsessed about Julia's drinking and her "meds." Now when Julia came home at 2:45 he

Jon Thomas Rowland

refused to give her her "meds" at all. Babs would send her to bed and wake her up for "meds" at 6 A.M.

We noticed that Julia came home at the same time on the weekend. She was steady on her feet. We talked to her. Her speech was clear. Her thinking seemed coherent. We invariably gave her her meds. Babs evidently had a grudge against Gladys for refusing to give Julia her "meds" to take in the tavern.

Now Babs claimed that Julia had a serious drinking problem. If Babs didn't withhold her "meds" she'd almost certainly go into a coma by 3 A.M. Clozapine and alcohol were a deadly combination. It said so right in the C.P.S. What? Dear's a doctor now? Gladys said Babs was hallucinating. The C.P.S. merely warned against excessive drinking while on clozapine, as with any CNS depressant.

Nonetheless for months Babs refused to give Julia her "meds" when she came for them. The "meds" sheets were spotted with asterisks indicating every time she'd noted Julia's "drunkenness" and refused to give her her "meds" till 6 A.M. It was like a rash.

Adam said it was hard to soar with eagles when you worked with turkeys. He said he hated Emile Durkheim House. As for me, he said he was fed up with my leaving garbage in the drain. He went over to the sink where I'd just rinsed the rice pot. He found some grains of rice as well as pieces of

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

tomato and lettuce from the salad. I thought it was mean of him, considering that I'd worked all day in the kitchen while he'd been sitting in the office doing "quarterly entries." I said I did the best I could. He said, mocking me now, that he realized I had my limitations. I got angry then and started to criticize the way the House was run. I did my best, but a lot of people didn't pull their own weight. Adam said something about working for a different House. No doubt about it, he'd do better in a better-run house. I'd heard it all before.

He wanted me to stop thinking about the sink, to come upstairs and have a cigarette. In the office I couldn't help thinking about his remarks, and I said something. I can still see him reaching for that bottle of painkillers. Please don't obsess about the sink, he pleaded. Outside he sat down on some of the railroad ties that lined the little garden. I can still see him. He was wearing a shirt over a T-shirt, running shoes, shorts. I could see the pressure bandage under the brace. Parts of the brace had been repaired with hockey tape. He was wearing his Ray-Bans. He said he could get a factory job.

I told him he was delusional. He was forty, and had a disability, and factory jobs weren't so plentiful any more. It was a delusional fantasy. In reality he was trapped, like all of us. He said it was my thinking that was trapped. I said no, I was just being realistic. He had a wife, an expensive mortgage, two cars to pay for, etc. Where else would he get

Jon Thomas Rowland

the same benefits he got from the House? He said he didn't care about the house, or the cars either. He'd done a lot of things before becoming a support worker. He'd rebuilt cars and renovated houses. I really didn't know him very well. I said I hoped he was right, if it meant knowing bad things about him.

*

I remember our final conversation. It started with Adam agreeing to have a coffee with me for a change. This time he made it himself. He made mine strong, the way I liked it. He made his own strong too, probably because he intended to stay late and he was already tired. I remember him showing me the heaping tablespoon of dark instant coffee mix at the bottom of the Styrofoam cup, asking if it was OK. I got the pitcher of milk out of the fridge. He added a lot to his coffee, and drank it all at once. He'd never get used to it. It was bitter. He shook his head. We went upstairs into the office. Adam grabbed the bottle of painkillers that was in its usual place, beside his Ray-Bans on the mantle. He took some tablets with a swig from the water bottle in the same place. His knees were bothering him. He was still wearing shorts, I think for the last time that year, maybe ever. His knees looked puffy and sore. It was Friday. He'd been shopping.

I must have said something about my shifts, probably that I

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

was doing a double. That meant that I'd started at 4 that afternoon - Gladys's shift - and wouldn't finish till 8 tomorrow morning.

By shift change at six o'clock his knees were usually bothering him. He'd lean back in his chair beside the computer. If it was summer, I'd look up his thigh between the cuff of his shorts and the hem of his briefs. I wasn't supposed to. If it was winter I'd wait for him to change into his boots and leave his runners on the fake hearth in front of our fake fireplace. I'd pick up one, still warm from his foot, the left foot without the big toe. I wasn't supposed to do this either, but I'd sniff at it, curious to know what, in this House of dirty feet, his feet smelled like. They smelled like "Irish Spring."

Tonight Adam sat down at the little round table where the manager counted the cigarette money. He moved his chair a little closer to the door, so he could stretch out his long legs and put his size 12 feet up on the photocopier while he gave me shift change. He ran down the list of twenty names tacked to the bulletin board beside the door.

I think the only news was Pierre. He wasn't doing very well. He hadn't come downstairs for breakfast, lunch, or supper. In fact he hadn't come out of his room all day. Adam mentioned the minutes I'd done of our meeting with his team. He said they were fine except for one mistake. I'd attributed the manager's suggestion that Pierre be given

Jon Thomas Rowland

injections to a team member. Apart from that they were fine. In the future all I needed to do was record the main points. He only wished that his own contributions hadn't been limited to five word statements.

He was sketching on one of those pads of cheap yellow foolscap that we used to make notes on during shift change. He was abstracted.

Adam said I was there far too much. He said at this rate I'd be burnt out in six months. At the time I thought he was being mean. Now I realize he was only thinking ahead.

*

The manager said Eugenia was just going to help with the tenants' hygiene and do a little housekeeping. I had my doubts. For one thing he gave her extra training, more than I ever got and I was supposed to be above her in the hierarchy. She was my successor. She'd inherit the snake.

The manager obviously liked her. On the Wednesday after Adam's death the manager, Harriet Parsons and myself were sitting in the office. I had just come back from my disturbing shopping trip. Harriet was acting as grievance counselor. She'd attended a seminar on bereavement. It was all so terrible. Our Adam. Who would have believed it. The manager agreed. There'd been no signs.

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

Harriet turned to Patricia and asked her how Eugenia was doing. Wonderful, she said. Lose one, find one.

*

Harriet said Adam's relatives said he always had nice things to say about Emile Durkheim House. I reminded her that for the last year Adam had actually been needy. I helped him out as much as he'd let me. I bought him all of his cigarettes, a lot of booze, and occasionally gave him money. Once a week I slipped a carton of Lucky Strikes into his "Roots" bag, and often a bottle too. He liked "Wiser's" whisky. I said the really important thing was, he let me. He said he really appreciated it. So where were the relatives she referred to? A lot they knew. She wanted to plant a tree in our wretched garden, dedicated to Adam's memory. I thought a marijuana plant would have been more appropriate. A lot she knew, too.

*

Head Office was Bedlam. It was suitably located on the edge of the old Thing Street Asylum's "catchment area." In reality its catchment area was the entire downtown core.

I called to get my separation papers. They were already 3 months late. They should have been processed automatically. I asked the woman who answered for the

Jon Thomas Rowland

name of the accountant, so I could write her myself. She immediately became suspicious. She wanted to know my name. "Paranoid subtype?" I said my name was none of her business, but their accountant's name was public information. She still wouldn't give it to me, so I looked it up on their website.

*

Harriet called. She said he'd known Adam for years. Every time she met him she asked him how was the job. He always said fine. I repeated what Adam had said to me, and that I'd told Head Office. Harriet wanted to know why I hadn't said anything to her. I thought it was obvious. Adam was still alive. She said it looked like Adam told me things that he never told anyone else. I said that appeared to be the case.

I'd no way of knowing what Harriet knew or didn't know. I'd probably assumed that she knew more than she did, but she'd done nothing about it. There was no point in telling her anything more, or in worrying very much about what she knew. She was the perfect agent of an agent of the government. She knew nothing.

As soon as she hung up I realized where she was headed. Now I look before I go out the door to see if anyone from the House is standing on the steps opposite. If so I usually turn around and go back upstairs to wait for them to go.

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

The cat seems glad to see me again so soon. Adam named him Toby because he has an extra toe on each front foot. Some haven't enough, others too many.

Today I couldn't wait for them to go inside, so I braced myself and headed out the door. Serge and the manager were on the steps. I caught some theatrical business between them, emanating (of course) from Serge. I heard his stage-whispered "Look! It's him." I watched them out of the corner of my eye as I locked the door. I heard Serge's phony "Hi Norman, how are yuh?" behind me.

*

I was on my way to the bank. I had just passed the House, face averted from the big bay window where the office was. The blinds were drawn. It was like the fish tank of someone who didn't want his fish to be seen. That probably meant Caspar was on duty. The manager went inside.

*

I saw Deloris standing in front of the House. She hadn't been around much since Mack went to the Care Home down the street. She occasionally came to the porch, at least if Adam or the manager was standing there, to tell us how he was doing. He hadn't changed. Before the Care Home he'd been in the hospital. He had difficulty breathing, but he still

smoked.

He still ate too much. He used to call in the afternoon to say hello to Karl and Frederick (not Fred), and to find out what we were having for supper. He missed the House. He had his mother call in the evening, after Adam and the manager had gone home, with the news that he'd be back that Friday. He wanted us to treat his return as imminent and inevitable. It was neither.

Mack's mother was aware of the problem. That was why she phoned. She said Mack would sit outside if anyone was smoking in the lounge. She'd never been inside the House, so she must have discussed Mack's condition with his "team." Someone from the team must have mentioned that almost everyone in the House was a smoker. The lounge was always full of smoke. Mack couldn't sit on the porch all winter. She couldn't sit on it one day. Adam didn't want the tenants to sit on the porch.

I visited him once at the Care Home. I hadn't been there since Barrie went there to die. One didn't go there to get better. I brought him a big bag of potato chips and some candy. I didn't think his diet mattered any more. He was sitting right inside the door. He seemed glad to see me. He stuffed the chips and the candy into his napsack. He looked smaller, though that might have been an effect of the lobby. It was larger and brighter than the lounge I was used to seeing him in. The air was clean. No one was smoking. He

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

was still overweight. He still had style. The bandage stood out against his throat. He asked about Frederick (not Fred) and Karl. They were fine. They missed him and wondered how he was doing. He said that was nice. He knew it wasn't true.

He said he missed Adam. I believed him. I remember how he talked about him in the office. After discussing his own illness, he'd discuss Adam's. I didn't know he had one. He used terms that Samantha liked to apply to herself, that seemed more appropriate applied to Adam. Adam was so sensitive, so fragile. Fragile was Samantha's word. It still sounded counterfeit.

We should have let him return. Wherever he was he'd smoke too much, eat too much, and not exercise at all. Caspar said he didn't give a fuck. We were afraid of having to handle his dressings. We were afraid he'd die on our hands.

I saw Mack sitting on the railing in front of the House. He'd ventured out of the Care Home and up the street to see Adam. It would have taken considerable effort, even if he'd been in shape. He'd never been in shape. He was crying. Samantha passed him on her way into the House. I heard her sigh, "Come on, Adam."

*

Jon Thomas Rowland

A man shouted "Nor-man Nor-man" in a deep, raucous voice. A woman called "Hi" in a much lighter voice. I recognized the man. It was Frederick (not Fred). I didn't recognize the second voice, then I realized she was Frederick (not Fred)'s worker. She'd had her hair done. She asked me where I'd been. I told her I'd left. She asked why. I said because of Adam. It was entirely because of Adam. You mean because he left, she said. Left, I said, wondering if she was being euphemistic. Sorry, she said. She was thinking of me and how I'd left, and of Adam. She paused. I realized there were similarities but so far they were superficial.

Just too upset? She probed a little. I said what happened was really terrible. I didn't agree with the people at work about it. She nodded. I said it really offended me the way they came from head office to help us grieve when they never did anything to prevent something like this happening when he was alive. They should have grieved more themselves, and felt guilty. I said it really bothered me that things that contributed to his death were still in effect. Nothing was done about them. Nothing would be.

She said I should know that I wasn't the only one who thought that way....

I thanked her for talking to me. I entered an internet cafe and sent an e-mail. Then I went to the bank. I couldn't make a withdrawal, because the system was down.

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

*

When I got home after my walk I saw their car parked in front. I guessed what had happened. The cops confirmed it. Adam's wife phoned the House. She said I was suicidal. Serge was on duty. What do you expect from a Brock University psychology major? He treated me like a client. He phoned the cops.

*

There are many indications that Adam wanted to be missed. I remember him serving lunch through the pass-through in the dining room. He'd just got back from a two-week vacation that he'd mainly spent visiting a relative in the hospital. He'd been delusional, and had tried to punch Adam. Adam had visited him every day. Adam was unwell himself, exhausted and burnt-out.

Suddenly Adam turned to me in the kitchen and asked me if anyone had missed him. I'm afraid I said something mocking. In truth most of our tenants were beyond missing us. They'd already been abandoned by everyone that mattered or ought to matter in their lives. They probably only got through their day by deliberately not missing people and things infinitely more important than ourselves. No, they hadn't missed him.

About a week ago he was getting some chicken pieces out of our new freezer in the pantry. They were supposed to have been separated and bagged in lots of twenty-five.

Jon Thomas Rowland

Unfortunately they'd arrived on one of Adam's sick days. It hadn't happened. It was probably the manager's fault. Patricia was lazy and bungling. She was really just an accountant. Adam said it looked like we needed him after all.

How sad that his self-worth depended on mattering to poor people to whom nothing mattered anymore. On mattering to incompetent losers like ourselves who needed him to fill our freezer.

I can't speak for anyone else but he mattered to me because I loved him.

*

Babs was leaving. She was going to learn how to be a teacher. I wouldn't miss her. She was always conning the manager for more hours, my shifts. She undermined me with the tenants, then complained to the manager that I was too harsh. If I cut Jack off cigarettes for smoking in her room, she'd give her a cigarette as soon as I left. Then she'd write a shift entry implying that I was probably smoking Jack's cigarettes myself. She was lazy, she slept all night, and she made meds errors. Because I criticized her for being late all the time, she asked me to give her a wake-up call at 5 A.M. I said she was a bitch. Adam said she was just a twit. Philip organized the farewell party. Actually it was just a poker night, but Philip co-opted it for his friend. Everyone had to contribute twenty dollars to Babs's education. When

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

I objected, Adam said it was for a good cause. She was going to teach "our children." Neither of us had any. I was gay. So far as I know, Adam was straight. Lately he'd thought of getting a dog.

Adam said to consider it this way. I hated Babs didn't I? Yes. Well, wasn't it worth twenty dollars never to see her again? Yes!

Adam drove me to and from the party that was in some horrible middle-class suburban house that Philip was sitting for the weekend. We didn't go shopping any more. That was the last time he took me anywhere in his car. I noticed a plastic water bottle with a hole in it. Adam asked me if I knew what it was. I said it looked like an ordinary bottle to me. He said watch. He removed a wad of tin foil from a corner of the ashtray and carefully unwrapped what looked to me like a little square of shit. At least it was brown and grainy. He said an old high school chum had turned up with it. Watch. He ignited the little brown square on the end of his cigarette and puffed the smoke into the plastic bottle where it swirled thick and heavy. He put his mouth on the gash in the side of it and inhaled deeply. I wish I'd inhaled what was left in the bottle when he handed it back to me, but I didn't. He said it helped him get to sleep at night. It didn't appear to impair his driving.

He said don't tell anyone. Then he said he didn't care.

After the "viewing" Caspar drove us back to the office. We sat for a few minutes with the manager. We were in shock. When I described what we'd seen the manager observed that Adam hadn't been able to control his own life or his own death either. The manager left first, after warning us about bad dreams. I was supposed to work early the next morning, while all the workers from Emile Durkheim Housing and Support Services attended the funeral. There was to be a sermon by a United Church minister. I wondered how that had happened. Adam had been an atheist. He said priests and ministers were as dirty as everybody else. Death was a "dirt nap." I phoned Caspar to say that I was quitting. I had no respect for the manager. I didn't even want to tell her what time it was. I'm not sure that I liked Caspar, but I respected his cynicism.

I told him that I wouldn't be in tomorrow, the day of Adam's funeral. I asked him to please notify the manager, as I didn't want to talk to him myself. I was quitting.

Caspar asked me what was wrong. He hoped I wasn't getting all depressed. I said I didn't see any future for myself in the House. I realized that Caspar probably wouldn't be Adam's successor. It would probably be some old hippie, or maybe an ex-punk, since the hippies were dying off.

I knew I wouldn't be able to stand it. He'd come in late because he was hung-over, then brag about his

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

professionalism. He'd talk about some "meds" manual he had, how he was going to give each of us a copy to show us how to dispense meds. Then when I relieved him I'd find meds forgotten or not signed for. He'd forget Alice's noon pill. Then he'd write "refused" on her "meds" sheet. Alice never refused anything in her life.

I saw the future. I wasn't in it. I didn't want to be either. Caspar tried to discourage me. He said the manager would be angry if I left without notice. I thought she should consider all the times I worked without any. It didn't bother me that she'd be angry. Nothing could make me happy.

Serge said he'd have no one to talk to. I told him not to worry. He'd find somebody else to listen to his lectures on psychopathology.

*

This is bad for all of us. None of us should ever have a gun, or poison, or access to a high place from which to leap. It would be imprudent to say so to the wrong person, or even to one of us in his official capacity, but Adam has made us almost as vulnerable as he was.

*

Adam's death was something that happened in the movies happening to me. It took Death nearly fifty years to catch

Jon Thomas Rowland

up. A few more years and I'd have escaped by dying myself. I nearly tripped and stumbled over my mother's death. Death would have caught me for sure. It barely affected my stride.

Death is everywhere. Death comes out of the House, stands leering between Serge and Patricia the Stinker, and leans on the railing of the steps next door. Death has Adam's gauntness without the pain. Adam's gauntness was Death's to begin with. The ashes in the can have more substance than Adam has now.

Death is no usurper. Death is a restored monarch re-establishing his reign. Adam was my protector but I wasn't his successor. Death settled that affair of state.

Death is next in line at the "No Frills." Death waits behind the cash with his bony hand on the till where anyone can see it if he will. He can't steal what's his by reversion. He wouldn't bother.

Death is not very frilly but very obsequious. The cashier weeps to see me bearing the purple bin. Death is in the no-name chicken strips and the white breast-meat nuggets. On every pack of Lucky Strikes a pale Death's Head pre-empts the Surgeon General's warning.

My clothes are stained with bleach and covered with ashes where Adam's bony fingers have touched them. Holes

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House
appear in the shirt Adam gave me and melt where he gazed
with eyes of flame. Look pretty for the picture, Connie.

Death stars in Pink Flamingos and sits stoned in the
audience with Adam and his lesbian girl friends from his job
at the women's shelter. Death laughs at everything. There
are no serious parts.

Death walks on the green grass in daylight and sleeps in the
ground. Death holds everything together. Death is bad
continuity. Death is the pink flamingos and the newspaper
blowing against their iron stilts during the credits.

Death is melodrama and real life. Death is the skeleton in
the gallery that doesn't scare us any more. Death makes us
wonder what it's doing here. Death makes us wonder what
we are.

*

On Friday afternoon Adam told me that he'd shaved off all
his pubic hair. I didn't know why. He was seeing himself
laid out at the morgue. He wanted to be clean.

I'm sitting on a battered park bench at the beginning of that
green strip at the end of Thing Street overlooking the lake.
There aren't any houses on this side of the street. When my
mother was alive I used to go "home" to Maypole City by
train. I would look up from the tracks below and see the big
houses and wonder what they were like. Now I know. I

Jon Thomas Rowland

look down and don't wonder anything at all about the train and where it's going. I know that too. I can see the outdoor tennis courts of some Toronto club. They're covered with tents. They look stuffed.

The traffic reminds me of Adam and my mother and my last visits to them. I was angry with my mother because after bringing her a computer all the way from Toronto she took her eighty-year-old boyfriend's advice that she couldn't use it. Too blind. Before I stormed out she asked me if there were anything I wanted. I said the old fart's obituary. She slapped my face. I couldn't grieve for her the way I'm grieving for Adam.

Caspar drove me to see Adam at the funeral home in Ossington. We went down there, along the lakeshore. Adam drove home that way every night. On either side of us it was a wasteland of high-rise condos and cheap townhouses. The funeral home was a converted fire hall off an exit ramp at the town line. It was the middle of nowhere. There were a lot of cars in the lot.

We knew that Adam had shot himself. We knew about his "little" gun, a Luger given to him by his father-in-law. We assumed that he had shot himself in the head, and that it would therefore be a closed casket. An obsequious flunky escorted us into a darkened room where they were playing some sort of mellow-jazzy elevator music and there were a lot of Slavic women, his in-laws, hovering about in sequined

The Support Worker of Emile Durkheim House

evening gowns. It was grotesque, but the only thing I really noticed was Adam's face, in a beam of light at the end of the room. It was an open casket after all. Caspar walked a few paces towards it, then recoiled. He'd seen enough. He was ready to go. I walked right up to the casket and studied Adam's face. There was a faint white disk in the middle of his brow. It must have been the bullet hole. The back of his head was probably blown off. I had never seen him asleep, but his eyelids looked unnaturally flat and sunken. His eyes had probably been blown out too. His lips were bloodless, thin and tight as if he were still experiencing pain.

*

Adam said he'd always wanted to be an actor. He was a good one. I really didn't know him very well.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jon Thomas Rowland was born in Chatham, Ontario in 1956. He did his B.A. and M.A. at the University of Toronto, and his Ph.D. (in 18th-century satire) at the University of Montreal. He taught at the University of Toronto from 1993 to 1995. His thesis was published by the University of Delaware Press in 1994 as Faint Praise and Civil Leer: The Decline of 18th-Century Panegyric. His study of the meanings of homosexuality in some obscure and not-so-obscure 18th-century texts was published by the Fairleigh Dickinson University Press in 1998 (Fairy's Dick and Sons).

Never obtaining tenure or even a steady job, Rowland subsequently worked in shelters and group-homes for mad people in Toronto, Canada. This experience, his appreciation of 18th-century satire, and the 20th-century satires of Celine and Burroughs, have affected his view of the world. He lives in the Parkdale neighborhood of Toronto, which affected it even worse. He continues to write. Plagiarists call his a *LOSER*.